



When I surrender, the Universe moves.  
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## The Christmas Celebration

by Granny Earth, 2003

Ask any Christian and they'll tell you, "It's the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ." Ask most youngsters and they'll tell you, "It's when Santa comes and brings you toys."

It's a time of gathering with friends and family, exchanging presents, eating lots of good food, sharing special drinks, decorating the tree, having fun and attending church services in remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ.

It can also be a lonely and sad time for those who have lost loved ones. Death, divorce, family estrangements and distance often bring memories that taint Christmas with anything but 'joy'. For many, the Christmas season evokes memories of shattered dreams, domestic break-ups, drunkenness, squabbles and fights and despondency. But, even these folks usually try to be happy regardless of painful memories from the past. Baking cookies, shopping for gifts and going to church can alleviate some of their pain. A lot of people 'fake it' through the season, waiting for the end to come. If you're one of these people, perhaps you'd be interested in how all of the merry-making got started in the first place.

Christmas (Christ-mas) has its roots in the ancient pagan celebrations of the Winter Solstice, as well as in the birth of Jesus. Prior to the Crusades and the 'dark ages', winter solstice observances were practiced by most cultures in the world; Native Americans, Celts, Persians, Orientals and Africans. The Winter Solstice was considered to be the turning point in the natural cycle of the year; this darkest night of the year is followed by a day that will dawn just a little bit earlier (this year it falls on December 21<sup>st</sup>, just 2 days after the full moon). Because 'Yule' (an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning wheel) signifies the completion of the "wheel" of the year, the Winter Solstice was (is) a good time for doing spiritual work. Yule traditions celebrated nature's renewal and helped affirm the connection to the energy and power of the Earth and the cosmos.

*\* Some neo-pagans believe that the dark nights of winter are when the veil between the spirit world and the living world is the thinnest, making this an*

*excellent time for self-examination and meditation on the hidden energies lying dormant, both within the Earth and the self.*

Prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Roman pagans celebrated the Winter Solstice with the festival of Saturnalia (birthday of the unconquered sun). It was celebrated with dancing, giving gifts and wearing wreaths of greenery, such as rosemary, bay, laurel, holly, ivy and mistletoe on their heads. Saturnalia was the most popular holiday of the Roman year, with merry-making starting on December 17 and lasting until the 23<sup>rd</sup>. This tradition, started thousands of years ago, was an attempt to inspire the sun to return after the dead of winter, which it always did. Saturnus, the Roman god of agriculture, was regarded as the father of Jupiter, Ceres, Juno and many others and is related to the 'Golden Age'; an era at the beginning of the world when Saturn ruled (so the 'myth' goes). It was a period of perfect harmony and prosperity. War, crime and injustice were unknown and the Earth brought forth fruits and even among animals there was peace. Therefore, in memory of this Golden Age, Saturnalia was observed from December 17<sup>th</sup> through the 23<sup>rd</sup> - at The Temple of Saturn, which also housed the Aerarium; the state treasury in Rome. This temple is one of the oldest in Rome

The sun deity, Sol Invictus (the invincible sun), whose cult spread from Syria across the Roman Empire beginning in the second century, was established as the official Roman deity by the emperor Aurelian in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The day set aside to honor Sol Invictus was December 25<sup>th</sup>. In the year 307 AD, Emperor Diocletian (a sun worshiper), was involved in the dedication of a temple to Mithra ( a Persian sun god- the mediator between god and man) and of formulating his version of Christianity. After his rein, Emperor Constantine maintained the title "Pontifex Maximus", the high priest of paganism. His coins were inscribed: SOL INVICTO COMITI (committed to the invincible sun).

These pagan holidays continued to be cherished and celebrated until the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Emperor Constantine, who by now had converted to Christianity, saw no way to stamp out the pagan festivals except to merge them with Christianity; first Saturnalia got renamed "Natalis Invicti" (the nativity of the unconquered sun), then the "Feast of the Nativity of the Sun of Righteousness" and then "Christ mass". The celebration of Jesus' birth was melded into age-old practices and became known as "Christmas." Because this pagan festive season was so popular, it was adopted as the time of the birth of Christ, thereby assuring that the pagans would be more easily converted to Christianity by the Roman Church. It is generally acknowledged that December 25<sup>th</sup> was not the actual date on which Jesus was born, although there seems to be no real evidence as to when his birthday was.

Emperor Constantine's primary objective was unity; unity in politics, in religion and in territory. A state religion that included all other cults within it obviously

helped to achieve this objective. In the interests of unity, Constantine deliberately chose to blur the distinctions among Christianity, Mithraism and Sol Invictus. He also decreed that Sunday- "The venerable day of the sun" would be the official day of rest. Early Christians before this time celebrated their holy day on the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday.

For those of you who struggle with the word 'Pagan', Webster defines it as; a peasant, villager or countryman. (The name pagan was the name given to idolaters in the early Christian church because the villagers remained for a long time unconverted. Heathen has the same origin; An individual of the pagan or unbelieving nations or those which worship idols and do not acknowledge the true God- a pagan; an idolater.)

**THE CHRISTMAS TREE:** Trees have been symbolic with Christmas since ancient history. In Egypt it was a palm tree (denoting the pagan Messiah as Baal-Tamar); in Rome it was the fir (to the pagan Messiah Baal-Berith) as in Germany and Europe. These trees symbolized the new-born God as Baal-Berith, "Lord of the Covenant" and shadowed forth the perpetuity and everlasting nature of his power. Many pagan cultures, such as the Celts, Greeks and Germans, considered the evergreen and firs to be sacred trees. As part of their winter solstice celebrations, they decorated them with nuts and fruit in an attempt to encourage the sun to return and bring spring. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a monk in Germany used the triangular shape of the Fir Tree to describe the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The people began to revere the Fir as God's Tree and by the 12<sup>th</sup> century it was being hung upside-down from ceilings at Christmastime in Central Europe as a symbol of Christianity. Martin Luther decorated a small tree with candles to show how the stars twinkled through the dark night. In 1841, when Prince Albert of Germany married Queen Victoria of England, he brought the Christmas tree custom to England and hence to the English speaking world. Many Christians frowned upon the pagan roots of the tree custom. However, it did survive and today is accepted world wide as part of the Christian Christmas ritual.

**SANTA CLAUS:** In the 4<sup>th</sup> century a bishop in Turkey named Nicholas was known for good deeds involving children. Bishop Nicholas was sanctified by the Catholic Church (they made him a Saint). His feast day, December 6<sup>th</sup> was celebrated throughout Europe. Ancient inhabitants of northern Europe believed a powerful pagan god, cloaked in red fur, galloped across the winter sky. These 'myths' combined with the legends of Bishop Nicholas and soon children were putting their shoes by the fireplace for St. Nicholas or "Sinter Klaas" to drop candy down the chimney for them, if they had been good. The myth was embellished over and over, with poems, such as this one, written in 1821.

### **The Children's Friend**

*Old Santeclaus with much delight  
His reindeer drives this frosty night.  
O'er chimney tops and tracks of snow,  
To bring his yearly gifts to you....*

In 1822 a protestant minister, Clement Clarke Moore, wrote his poem, "The Night Before Christmas", and the legend became an American tradition!

If you find yourself not being able to get into the Christmas spirit next time, you might try taking a walk outside on that night just to gaze at the moon and the stars. Take the time to let yourself feel the peaceful, awesome energy of the Universe. You might just be overcome by the majesty and the miracle of it all, just as the ancient pagans were - The Miracle of Divine Creation.