

A Brief History of Christmas

Part Two: The Height of Christian Christmas

Two Long Seasons

- In the centuries after Christmas becomes an established part of the Christian calendar, Easter and Christmas come to dominate the Christian calendar.
 - The Easter season becomes 40 days of Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, then 50 days from Easter to Pentecost Sunday (in other words, about a quarter of the solar year).
 - The Christmas season begins as the Advent season, starting four Sundays before December 25, then twelve days of Christmas, culminating in the feast of Epiphany on January 6.
- In both cases, the days leading up to the festivals were traditionally times of fasting. During Lent, Christians would only eat one meal until the sun went down (for the sake of children's health they made the night-eating exception) except for on Sundays, and Advent was for centuries just as strict.
- Sundays were always fast-breaking days in the Christian tradition—before the era of American Protestantism (which we'll get to next week), people actually drank *more* on Sundays than during the week in these seasons.

The Bible and Advent

- Advent is the Latin word for “coming,” and the season celebrates expectations of Christ's coming into a darkening world. In the northern hemisphere, after all, it falls in the last parts of the solar year, when the world is in fact getting darker by the day.
- Throughout the Christian world a tradition arises during Advent, namely public Scripture readings and sermons dealing both with the expected coming of Christ in the pre-Christian era and the expected coming-again of Christ in the Christian era.
- During Epiphany, Scripture readings and sermons traditionally dealt with the baptism of Jesus and in general Scripture passages dealing with light and lights.

Oddities of Advent

- In some parts of Europe, the poor could construct and carry around “Advent Images,” a pair of dolls representing Mary and Jesus, and tradition held that anyone not giving a halfpenny to a poor person carrying such an image would bring a year of bad luck.
- In other parts, farmers mark the beginning of the season by burning bundles of straw, marking the beginning of a season of darkness with fires that light up the countryside.
- In medieval Epiphany festivals, towns would put on plays in which dim but well-intentioned shepherds defeated the plots of the trickster Mak before hearing the angels' annunciation and in which Herod hired rogue knights to go and slaughter the innocents. A woman who doubts the virgin birth out loud is invited to inspect (yes, medieval plays could get quite awkward) and is stricken with leprosy for her lack of faith.

The Coming Storm

- As we will discuss next week, the strong focus on Mary and the mixture of pagan with Christian practices made Christmas very suspect among some early Protestant groups. The early modern Church fought hard over the festival of the Nativity.
- By the time we get to the modern era, the month preceding rather than following December 25 becomes the “Christmas Season, and the meaning changes entirely. That will be two weeks from now.