



Merry Christmas!

We celebrate the birth of our Lord with great joy, turning the entire month of December into the Christmas Season. We put up trees and lights, wrap packages, send cards, and sing carols. But did you know that for the first few hundred years of Christianity December 25th was just another day? No one celebrated our Lord's birthday.

We find birth stories only in Matthew's and Luke's gospels; neither Mark nor John provide us with any information about Jesus' birth or childhood. And if we read Matthew and Luke carefully, we find two very different stories! In Matthew's version we find an angel visiting Joseph in a dream, while Luke's gospel tells us the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her that she was to become the Mother of God. Matthew gives us the Wise Men, but says nothing of shepherds, while Luke tells us of shepherds but says nothing of Wise Men. Matthew's Wise Men pay homage to Jesus in "a house", while Luke tells us of a manger, but says nothing about a stable, cattle, oxen, or lambs.

Neither Matthew nor Luke give us a date for Jesus' birth. December 25 was a date settled on by church leaders in the middle of the 4th century. Up until that point, Easter was the most important day on the church calendar, as followers of Christ celebrated his resurrection. But followers

of Christ wanted to know more about the human side of Jesus, including his birth and childhood, and from that grew a desire to mark a day to celebrate Jesus' birth.

We call the four weeks leading up to Christmas "Advent". The word is from a Latin root that means "coming", and it is a reminder to us that the Christ who was born in Bethlehem will come again in glory. On the first Sunday of Advent we traditionally sing the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel", which, while we think of it as a Christmas carol, really is a hymn that points us to the coming again of our Lord. We will, as the song bids us, "Rejoice! Rejoice" that day as the whole world is filled with "heaven's peace".

The month of December is a joyous month, and we should celebrate the birth of our Lord with lights, decorations, and singing, leaping for joy just as John the Baptist did in his mother's womb. But we should also mark the days of Advent as a time for us to reflect on that day when God came to us in the form of a baby born in such a humble state. Love was born that day, and, as Mary would sing, God "would scatter the proud, bring down the powerful, lift up the lowly, send the rich away empty, and fill the hungry with good things."

Celebrate the month with joy, sing carols with gusto, but remember that the month is about much more than a birthday party. It is about looking forward with hope to that day when Christ will come again. Prepare yourself for the month by beginning and ending each day with a quiet prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, Come". But fill the rest of each day with all your favorite carols, yes, even Rudolph!