

AMERICA'S CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

*As taught by Pastor Ron Baity
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As we move into the Christmas season, we celebrate the Birth of our Dear Lord. There are other attachments to this season that we partake of; in most cases not knowing the history or tradition. Today, we look at the history of some of our traditions and how we came to inherit them.

I. THE CHRISTMAS TREE

A. Tracing the history of the tree

1. It can be traced back to 200 A.D, to an early church father, Tertullian.
2. He wrote: "You are the light of the world, a tree ever green, if you have renounced the heathen temple."

B. In 716 A.D., Saint Boniface also played a part in the tradition of the tree.

1. He confronted a chieftain who was about to offer his prince as a bloody human sacrifice.

- a. The sacrifice was to be to a pagan god of thunder.
- b. The god supposedly lived in the huge oak tree.

2. Boniface took an ax and chopped down the oak tree.

- a. Beside the fallen oak was an evergreen tree.
- b. Boniface pointed to the tree and said:

"This is the word, and this is the counsel. Not a drop of blood shall fall tonight, for this is the birth-night of Saint Christ, Son of the All-Father and Saviour of the world. This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be a home tree tonight. It is the wood of peace, for your houses are built of fir. It is the sign of endless life, for its branches are ever green. See how it points toward Heaven! Let this be called the tree of the Christ Child; gather about it, not in the wild woods but in your homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and lights of kindness."

3. Boniface used the triangular shape of the evergreen tree to explain the Trinity.

II. THE TRADITION OF LIGHTS ON THE TREE

- A. Martin Luther is credited with popularizing the tradition.
- B. While walking home one night in 1520, he noticed the countless stars illuminating the night.
 - 1. Arriving home, he set up an evergreen tree placing a large number of small candles on its branches.
 - 2. Under the tree, he set up symbols of the Birth of Christ.
 - 3. The lights on the tree would represent the stars in the sky shining down on the Bethlehem scene when Christ was born.

III. HISTORY OF SOME OF THE FAVORITE HYMNS OF CHRISTMAS

- A. Phillip Brooks was a clergyman in Massachusetts.
- B. Phillip Brooks visited the Holy Land in 1865.
 - 1. He wrote: *"After an early dinner, we took our horses and rode to Bethlehem... It was only about two hours when we came to the town, situated on an eastern ridge of a range of hills, surrounded by its terraced gardens. It is a good-looking town, better built than any other we have seen in Palestine... Before dark, we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star... It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it (all the Holy Places are caves here), in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds... ..As we passed, the shepherds were still 'keeping watch over their flocks or leading them home to fold.'"*
 - 2. Brooks was profoundly touched by his visit to Israel.
- C. In 1866, Brooks returned to Massachusetts and wrote the carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem":

*"O little town of Bethlehem!
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth,
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears
of all the years,
Are met in thee tonight."*
- D. History of the song, "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing", written in 1739.
 - 1. It was originally composed by Charles Wesley, who penned as many as 9,000 hymns and poems.
 - 2. It was said to be inspired by the sounds of the bells as he walked to church one Christmas morning:

*"Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled
Joyful, all ye nations, rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.*

*Christ, by highest heaven adored
Christ, the everlasting Lord
Late in time behold him come
Offspring of the Virgin's womb
Hail the Flesh, the God Head see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel!
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King"*

- IV. SOME IMPORTANT STATS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA
- A. Alabama became the first state to recognize Christmas Day as a holiday.
 - B. Christmas Day became a federal holiday in 1870 with the signature of President Ulysses S. Grant.
 - C. In 1880, Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, strung electric Christmas lights on his Menlo Park laboratory.
 - D. In 1882, Edward Johnson, Edison's partner in the Edison Illumination Company, assembled the first "string" of electric Christmas tree lights.
 - E. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland placed the first "electrically- lit" Christmas tree in the White House.
 - F. In 1923, President Calvin Coolidge turned on the 3,000 electric lights on the first "National Christmas Tree", located outside the White House on the ellipse of the South Lawn.