

The Colors of Christmas

A reflection on preparing
for Christmas



Ah, tradition. Our families and celebrations are often sprinkled with seasonal traditions that bring us joy and remind us of times gone by or people who have graced our lives. These traditions often add an element of comfort as well as enrichment to our special moments. But do you know where or when your traditions began? Do you know the meaning behind the traditions you hold so dear? This resource takes a look at some of the customs around one of our favorite celebrations—Christmas.

The Colors of Christmas Reflection

What do Halloween, Easter, and Christmas have in common? They are not just opportunities to feed our sweet tooth. These celebrations are times of the year where Christianity has reinterpreted the secular to show the strength and promise of the Gospel. Thus, Halloween is not a haunting night, but All Hallowed's Eve, the night before All Saints Day when we celebrate the ministries and lives of all who have witnessed to the faith, all the saints of God. Easter is not merely new life—not a bunny-like population explosion—but the promise of life everlasting because Jesus broke through death's bonds in his resurrection.

And Christmas? What does your celebration of Christmas look like? *(Allow time for responses.)*

Most Christians have adopted the custom of putting up a Christmas tree. Have you thought much about how your Christmas tree can be a faith expression? Let's take a look at the start of the evergreen's place in our celebration of Jesus' birth.

In the 7th century a monk from Crediton, Devonshire, went to Germany to teach the Word of God. He did many good works there, and spent much time in Thuringia, an area which was to become the cradle of the Christmas Decoration Industry.

About This Resource

This resource is intended to be a reflection while preparing for Christmas. It may be used individually, in small groups, in an ecumenical setting or retreat, as a children's sermon, or as an intergenerational program for teens to share in nursing homes or assisted-living facilities.

For a group, consider setting up a small table-top tree with the various items available to place on the tree as you talk about them. Consider asking individuals to place the items on the tree as a way to reinforce the message and involve the audience. If using this as a children's sermon, provide candy canes for children to take when they go back to their seats.

Suggested hymns are dispersed throughout the text. Sing as many verses as time and interest permits. Decide ahead of time if you will use hymnals, a prepared handout with the verses written out (be sure to honor copyright issues), or sing them from memory. Select one or more of your group's favorite Christmas hymns to sing at the closing.

If refreshments are served after or there is a time to gather informally, invite attendees to talk about the Colors of Christmas information and how this will impact their Christmas plans this year.

Legend has it that he used the triangular shape of the Fir Tree to describe the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The converted people began to revere the Fir tree as God's tree, as they had previously revered the Oak. By the 12th century it was being hung, upside-down, from ceilings at Christmastime in Central Europe, as a symbol of Christianity.

The first decorated tree was at Riga in Latvia, in 1510. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther is said to have decorated a small Christmas tree with candles, to show his children how the stars twinkled through the dark night. (www.christmasarchives.com/trees.html)

Changing Times

Over the years, life was impacted by times of prosperity or war or new technology. During these periods of change, the Christmas tree also underwent a transformation. Small, tabletop trees gave way to floor-to-ceiling trees in homes of the wealthy during times of prosperity. The flag of one's nation became a tree-topper during the times of war, and large trees were set up in public spaces to encourage hope. Ornaments from one's nation of ancestral origin filled many branches. In many homes, the handcrafted art of children graced prominent places on the tree.

Just as our lives and culture are not static, styles of decoration continue to change, often reflecting the influence of the times. Do you remember the aluminum trees with floodlights of the 1960s? Were you or are you still part of a craft group that has influenced what you put on your tree? Do you recall seeing ornaments that reflected America's history during the country's bicentennial celebration? And who hasn't seen one of the many themed trees on display in stores? You want a Disney tree? It's there. Does someone in your home love dancing? Perhaps you have a ballet-inspired tree. Do your children or grandchildren excel in sports? Maybe you have a tree decked out with baseball, football, or soccer decorations? And who among us hasn't seen or created a color-coordinated tree?

The Christmas tree is a place for creativity; it fuels nostalgia and speaks to what is important to us. And certainly our country, families, creativity, and achievements are and will continue to be important to us. At the same time, let's remember that Christmas originally served to give witness to faith. How do our Christmas trees glorify God and bear witness to our faith today? Let me share the lessons of one mother who taught her children to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas through her tree using the colors of Christmas.



Meaningful Colors

The green tree represents the never-ending love and presence of God in our lives. The evergreen tree does not lose its needles in the cold or heat. Likewise God does not lose us and we cannot lose sight of God for the sake of the world.

White lights or clip-on candles remind us of Jesus, the light of the world, and our call as disciples to bear witness throughout the world today.

Sing “This Little Light of Mine” (ELW 677)

A red garland draped around the tree is a reminder that we are wrapped in the gracious act of redemption. Jesus was not only a baby—a warm and cuddly gift that is easy to receive; He is the savior who gave his very life so that we may live with God.

Blue ornaments represent heaven, hope, and peace. The vastness of the heavens above remind us of God’s never-ending love, giving us hope in the midst of adversity, and peace as we cling to the promises of God.

Sing “From Heav’n above to Earth I Come” (ELW 268)



Purple ornaments reflect royalty. Jesus was mocked at his death as the King of the Jews. Christians bear witness to him as the King of Kings in Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus. The purple reminds us that Jesus’ kingdom is not a secular one, but one in which God’s way reigns supreme. What looks like a mockery of Jesus’ kingship is in reality an opportunity to look deeper to see what a true king does for his people. The sacred is not confined or defined by secular interpretations.

Yellow shines like the brilliant light that one imagines with the angels singing on the hillsides of Bethlehem to let the shepherds know of the birth of the Savior, or the brilliance of the star that shone over Bethlehem. Placing a yellow-lighted angel or star on the top of the tree reminds us of the ways in which God spread the good news of Jesus’ birth. We are reminded to look at the everyday things in life—like a star—and everyday people—like shepherds—to see God at work in our lives.

Sing “Angels We Have Heard on High” (ELW 289)

Silver and gold ornaments, garland, or tinsel remind us of God’s riches—riches that are not limited by the human eye. After all, a baby born in a barn and lying in a manger is hardly what one would think of as rich. The riches of God—like redemption, forgiveness, grace—are those things we don’t necessarily see with the eye, but know in our hearts. We are challenged to look at all God’s children in the same way, not merely with our eyes but with our hearts also.

Red-and-white candy canes are hung on the tree as a reminder that God’s redemption and our forgiveness go hand-in-hand. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we can live every day knowing that our sins are forgiven. When children visit, they are invited to select a candy cane from the tree as a reminder of this great gift of God’s love.

Sing “I Love to Tell the Story” (ELW 661)

Cookies of all colors and shapes remind us of the goodness of God and God’s provision for our needs. Hanging decorated, homemade cookies on the tree is a tangible sign of this goodness. When taken down, the cookie-filled tree is then placed in the backyard until Epiphany so the birds may enjoy this goodness as well.

Simple crèches reflecting different nationalities placed under the tree remind us that Jesus came into this world for all. In fact, moving the baby Jesus from one manger into the manger of another crèche reinforces this message.

Sing “Away in a Manger” (ELW 277)

There you have it, the colors of Christmas. What colors will your Christmas be this year?

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to make Christmas a time to witness to our faith and celebrate your birth as well as the hope that your presence—in the past, in the present, and in the future—brings us. Make us bold witnesses for your sake. Amen.

Did you know?

Women of the ELCA resources, such as this one, are available free to individuals, small groups, and congregations. Covering a variety of topics, we are bringing Lutheran perspectives and new voices to issues that matter. By making a donation to Women of the ELCA, you will help us continue and expand this important educational ministry. Give online at womenoftheelca.org or mail to Women of the ELCA, ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009.

Copyright © 2009 Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Written by Bonnie B. Belasic, former director for special projects, Women of the ELCA. Her mother, Ruth, routinely shared the colors of Christmas with her and her siblings as well as many children and adults who took the time to listen. Ruth’s great-granddaughter, Wynter, added the crèche portion. All rights reserved. May be reproduced for use in Women of the ELCA congregational units and by synodical women’s organization of Women of the ELCA provided each copy is reproduced in its entirety and carries this copyright notice. Please direct all other requests for permission to reproduce to women.elca@elca.org.

