

# Christmas

Christmas is a Christian holiday that marks the birth of Jesus, who Christians believe to be the Son of God. Western Christian and many Eastern Orthodox Christian observers usually celebrate Christmas on **December 25<sup>th</sup>**. In addition, Christmas Eve (**December 24<sup>th</sup>**) is an important day of observance for many Christians. Armenian Apostolic observers celebrate Christmas, also known as the Epiphany, on **January 6<sup>th</sup>**, while some Eastern Orthodox observers celebrate Christmas on January 7<sup>th</sup>.

## The Story of Christmas

Jesus' birth, known as the Nativity, is described in the New Testament of the Bible. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke give different accounts, but both accounts write that Jesus was born to a woman called Mary who was married to Joseph, a carpenter. The Gospels state that Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant. According to tradition, Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem shortly before Jesus' birth. When they arrived in Bethlehem, however, the local inn was fully occupied. The innkeeper let them stay in the cave below his house that was used as a stable for his animals. That was where Mary gave birth to Jesus. The news of Jesus's birth reached three magi (wise men) and a group of shepherds, who traveled to visit Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. These figures, along with the stable animals, comprise the traditional nativity scenes that are often displayed during this season.

## Advent

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year and is the period of preparation for the celebration of the anniversary of Jesus' birth. It is a time of joyous anticipation and hope for the Second Coming of Christ, when Jesus will return to Earth (this belief is derived from prophecies in Christian scripture). The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* meaning "coming," and begins four Sundays before Christmas day. It is traditionally a penitential or Lenten season (meaning that Christians are expected to atone for their sins and recommit to their faith through actions like confession or fasting), but it is no longer kept as strictly as other penitential seasons like Lent.

In preparation for Christmas, Orthodox Christians might increase their spiritual exercise, particularly through fasting. The Christmas fast begins on **November 15<sup>th</sup>** and lasts until **December 25<sup>th</sup>**. The fast includes refraining from meat, dairy, fish, wine, and oil.

Advent wreaths are popular, especially in churches. They are made with fir branches and four candles. A candle is lit each Sunday during Advent.

## Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

For many Christians, participating in a religious service plays an important part in the observance

of Christmas. Christmas Eve or Christmas Day services often retell and celebrate the account of Jesus's birth.

### **Cultural Celebrations**

Though Christmas is celebrated by Christians around the world, many recognize the holiday as a cultural day rather than a religious holy day. Cultural celebrations of Christmas can include Christmas lights, gift-giving, Christmas cards, caroling, hanging holiday wreaths, and Christmas tree decorating. Additionally, at many celebrations, it is common for people to dress up as Santa Claus and give gifts to children.

It is also important to keep in mind that not all Christians celebrate Christmas. Some Christians, including Jehovah's Witnesses, do not celebrate any holidays or birthdays.

### **Scheduling**

Due to how intertwined Christmas is with American culture, both Christians and non-Christians alike may request time off around the holiday season. Additionally, many Americans are in multi-faith relationships or families and may need time off to observe holidays for more than one religious tradition. Be aware of potential scheduling conflicts when it comes to your employees' time off over the holidays. Consider implementing a policy for managing time-off requests (such as a rotation schedule from year to year).

Keep in mind religious and non-religious requests for time off are valid—non-religious employees may have a strong family or cultural tradition around Christmas or want to spend time with their children who are on a break from school. Remember some employees may observe Christmas on a day other than December 25<sup>th</sup>.

### **Parties**

Holiday or Christmas parties in the office can be a source of tension. For recommendations on how to create an inclusive office celebration, see our December Dilemma Tip Sheet.

### **Greetings**

If you know that a colleague celebrates Christmas, it is appropriate to greet them with a simple "Merry Christmas." If you don't know whether a colleague celebrates Christmas, then a more general greeting like "Happy Holidays," "Season's Greetings," or "Happy Year End" may be preferable.

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