

Read also Exodus 13:3-10, Deuteronomy 16 excerpts (16:2, 6b-7, 10-11). Check out the service at [www.fpcd.org](http://www.fpcd.org).

From the beginning the Jews partied.

- Joseph held a huge banquet when his father and brothers moved to Egypt
- Job and his children partied
- Moses told Pharaoh, “We need to go out to the desert to have a party to worship our God.” When Pharaoh learned they wanted to take the kids and women, he said, “Only men can go,” knowing that would be no fun!

When Israel received the law, it contained instructions for regular festivals:

“This is a day to remember forever -- the day you left Egypt, the place of your slavery. . . . You must celebrate this event in this month each year. . . . For seven days the bread you eat must be made without yeast. Then on the seventh day, celebrate a feast to the LORD [and] you must explain to your children, ‘I am celebrating what the LORD did for me when I left Egypt.’ **This annual festival will be a visible sign to you, like a mark branded on your hand or your forehead.** Let it remind you always to recite this teaching of the LORD: ‘With a strong hand, the LORD rescued you from Egypt’” (Ex 13 excerpts). ~ Feast of Unleavened Bread

“Sacrifice it [to the LORD for his name to be honored], in the evening as the sun goes down on the anniversary of your exodus from Egypt. Roast the lamb and eat it in the place the LORD your God chooses” (Deut 16 excerpts). ~ Passover

“Celebrate the Festival of Harvest to honor the LORD your God. Bring him a voluntary offering in proportion to the blessings you have received from him. . . . Celebrate with your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites from your towns, and the foreigners, orphans, and widows who live among you” (Deut 16:10-11).

These festivals were very important. They involved preparation of the self. Each person was to think about their sins and cleanse themselves, or prepare a special offering. For another festival they built shelters they lived in for a week, to commemorate the temporary shelters the Jews lived in in the desert. God is given honor in the celebratory remembering.

Did you notice? Each festival takes active participation—the people were to *do something*. They did not come empty-handed or just show up. It was an active celebration and it involved the whole community’s common life.

You have special parties that you prepare for and invite friends to today because they mean something which you give special thought to:

- Birthday parties
- Christmas
- Easter

You plan ahead, buy presents, have a special cake, and celebrate with others. It would be pretty boring to have a party with just yourself! It happens in community. We all celebrate each other together. We worship God together as we celebrate these events.

When I was a child, all these things were a big deal. We had huge birthday parties—but not at Chuck-E-Cheese—at home. I remember a four-tiered doll cake every year, and games such as potato sack races in the front yard; and crying because I didn't win and get a prize. It wasn't fair! My parents explained that prizes were for guests.

And then Christmas. My brother and I were made to get dressed in our Sunday best and wait until my dad had these huge lights and movie camera rolling. It seemed to take hours! The living room was packed with presents. These parties were a time when my parents were extravagant. Why?

They were important celebrations.

I didn't really get it at the time—I hated the waiting, the insistence on putting on nice clothes. I remember the year when I told my kids—you can wear your PJs and you don't have to brush your hair. And one year we got really rebellious and opened all our presents on Christmas Eve!

You know what was weird? From then on they wanted to wait until Christmas morning. Why? It was the way we had always done it.

On Easter, I was given the best dress of the year, and always had a hat and sometimes had a parasol.

Why do we do this? Why celebrate?

To remember. But there's more to it. We do this together. It's communal. We prepare for it, and we give something of ourselves. The idea is to give something to God because God has disclosed himself through giving something to us.

So we have Santa at Christmas, whose model is a 4<sup>th</sup> Century saint named Nicholas, who had a reputation for secret gift-giving.<sup>1</sup> He left coins and presents in the shoes of children to help them understand God's grace—hence stockings left for Santa Claus.

Even secular people instinctively follow this need for celebrating God's generosity, though they may not know of its origin.

But secular culture added conditions: "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town. . . . He knows if you've been bad or good . . ." Earn that gift!

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<sup>1</sup>Did you know that Saint Nicholas signed the Nicene Creed in 325 AD, in answer to a request from Constantine to attend the First Council of Nicaea?

But God's festivals were not done to earn anything, they were to act out God's care to paint a picture of what God does and is always doing even now so that we remember.

The topical question was: Why do we celebrate Lent and Advent? The short answer is to prepare for these two most important days in the Christian faith. It's saying, "With a strong hand the Lord rescued you."

Not only that, all the Jewish festivals point to these two significant events of Jesus.

What has Jesus done? Remember the lamb that the Jews sacrificed and at Passover? In 1 Corinthians Paul says this:

"Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. So let us celebrate the festival, not with the old bread of wickedness and evil, but with the new bread of sincerity and truth" (5:7-8).

Lent, which began being observed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, is a Christian festival. It represents the forty days before Easter. Why forty? Because Jesus fasted and prayed for forty days in the wilderness. Moses also fasted and prayed for forty days before receiving the law. In addition, the children of Israel were in the desert for forty years. Originally, Lent was used to teach new believers about the faith, leading to their baptism on Easter.

When you pray and read Scripture for forty days during Lent you connect with the story—you are physically and spiritually involved; that is, involved with your whole being. You grow as you reflect on Jesus' sacrifice. Hebrews tells us:

That first covenant between God and Israel had regulations for worship and a place of worship here on earth. . . . So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood -- not the blood of goats and calves -- he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever. Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant (Hebrews 9:1, 11-15).

Do you understand the significance of that? It is life-changing. Hope is initiated in what Jesus did.

Advent is the four weeks before Christmas and we wait expectantly for Christ's coming—including his second coming. We light candles; talk about the prophecies of his coming; we read devotionals on Advent calendars. At our house we have a "house" with little doors and each day

a child opens a door and finds a gift. Another calendar has felt figurines and one is placed in a picture of a manger each day to recall the story. It's active and interactive.

Are you practicing these festivals? They are gifts to you to build your faith. Ultimately, it is not one more trip to the mall, or one more movie or everyday event which will enrich your life. It is what has been done for you by the LORD.

Are you remembering? Are you participating? It is God's gift to you.

AMEN