

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 1/2/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, January 3, you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who are affected by the difficult weather conditions throughout our country and world. Pray that they might be protected from harsh weather and that the resources need for survival are provide. Offer prayers also for those who give of their time and energy to help those who are in need.*

Christmas is just too short. The season of Christmas, I mean. The twelve days of Christmas that begin Christmas Day and end on January 5, the day before Epiphany. We have four weeks of Advent and as many as eight weeks of Epiphany, but only twelve days of Christmas. And, at best, only two Sundays. If Christmas Day falls on a Monday or Tuesday, there is only one Sunday in the Christmas season. This year, the first of those two Sundays was Christmas Day and the second one is January 1. Lots of people come for Christmas Eve (still, technically part of Advent), but not for Christmas Day, the day the Church officially commemorates the Nativity of CHRIST. And lots of people don't come for January 1 because it's New Year's Day. Though they worshiped on Christmas Eve, many won't actually celebrate Christmas during the season of Christmas.

Yet there is so much that happens, in terms of Church commemorations and festivals, during these twelve days. Of course, again, December 25 is the "Nativity of Our LORD," the festival of the birth of CHRIST. December 26 is the festival of "Stephen, Deacon and Martyr," the day the Church remembers the first person to die for their Christian faith. The 27th of December is the festival of "John, Apostle and Evangelist," commemorating the disciple of JESUS who wrote the first gospel, three letters recorded in the Bible, and the book of Revelation. December 28 is the festival of "Holy Innocents, Martyrs" that remembers the children that were killed by King Herod in his attempt to kill JESUS, the ONE born to be KING of the Jews. January 1, which is a Sunday this year, is the "Name of JESUS," which commemorates JESUS' circumcision on the eighth day after HIS birth. This was in keeping with Jewish law. It recalls Joseph's following of the angel's instructions by naming the baby JESUS, which means, "GOD saves."

Then comes the "Epiphany of Our LORD" on January 6, this year on a Friday, so we won't hear about that in church either. Though not part of Christmas, but rather the beginning of the next season of the Church, we still often connect this festival with the season of Christmas. It recalls the visit of the wisemen or magi to the CHRIST child. If you read Matthew 2:1-12 or if you've been paying attention in church, the wisemen do not come on Christmas. It was probably two years after JESUS birth that they arrive to worship the Jewish SAVIOR. We know because of several clues in that story. Verse 11 begins, "On coming to the house..." Mary and Joseph and JESUS were staying in a house in Bethlehem. Perhaps because of the ridicule Mary might have experienced because of having a child before her marriage to Joseph, the family decided not to return to Nazareth at this time and to stay in Bethlehem. So, it definitely wasn't Christmas Eve when the magi got there. Then, in several places in that story, JESUS is referred to as "the child," not the babe or baby that the shepherds beheld. JESUS is no longer an infant but a child, suggesting that HE is at least a toddler, probably about two years old. And Herod had all children two years and younger put to death based on the signs the magi revealed to him, which implies that JESUS fell into this age range. (So, if you want to leave your Christmas decorations up, you can tell people you're just waiting until the wisemen arrive.)

With so much to remember in this season, I don't know how Christmas ended up being only twelve days long. I'd like to blame this short season on the person who wrote the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," but the song was written to follow the time frame set by the Church, rather than the other way around. Yet there is so much surrounding birth of JESUS and much of it tragic—children put to death and Stephen being stoned to death—that it helps us to understand why we need JESUS. And not just in that time. The news that we hear

today reminds us, also, that we need a SAVIOR and, though filled with heartbreaking events, both then and now, we can rejoice in the “good news that will bring great joy to all the people.” To us, a SAVIOR is born.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey