



Why do we celebrate Christmas in winter when Jesus was born in the spring?

This question came from one of the participants in our "Greatest Gift" Christmas program right before "the curtain went up" on the program. My response at the time was, "For starters, we don't know for sure that Jesus was born in the spring. I don't have time to tell you more than that right now, but I will tell you later." Well, "later" is now.

Regarding this question there is one thing that can be stated with certainty: We don't know the date of Jesus' birth.

The Bible is silent on the issue. The only hints it gives us is that Jesus was born during a Roman census and while shepherds were "living out in the fields." Those two hints are usually given as reasons why He couldn't have been in the winter. The theory is that a census wouldn't have been taken during the winter months and shepherds typically weren't "living out in the fields" at that time of year. But others argue that the Romans wouldn't have cared if they made people travel during difficult travel weather, and shepherds did sometimes graze flocks in the fields at times during the winter. So, while spring is a more likely date for Jesus' birth, winter is still a possibility.

The early church is no help with this question. Christmas was not celebrated - as far as any records show - for at least 200 years after Jesus' birth. Some early church leaders even suggested that celebrating birthdays was something only done for pagan gods. Earliest speculations about the date varied from March or April to November or January.

The earliest official record of a birthday celebration for Jesus held on December 25 was 336 a.d. after Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the empire's favored religion.

Why December 25? Many historians believe that the church stirred up interest in a festival at this time of year to counter the pagan festivals surrounding the winter solstice - the 'coming back' of the sun. December 25 already hosted two festivals dedicated to celebrating the sun: *natalis solis invicti* (the Roman "birth of the unconquered sun"), and the birthday of Mithras, the Iranian "Sun of Righteousness" whose worship was popular with Roman soldiers. The winter solstice, another celebration of the sun, fell just a few days earlier. The thinking goes that church leaders decided to adopt that date and introduce a new festival - a festival that Christians could celebrate. Celebrating Jesus' birth on December 25 would be an easy way to introduce Jesus to a pagan world that would be curious about this Son Christians were celebrating on the same day they celebrated the sun.

The bottom line is that the Bible gives us no date for Christ's birth, because it doesn't command us to celebrate it. That, however, doesn't mean that it's wrong for us to celebrate His birth. On the contrary, in the Old Testament God had His people celebrate lots of special festivals in order to force them to remember things He had done for them - and to force them to tell their children about these things. Christmas is a celebration that really does force us to remember that God loves us so much He came to earth to be with us. It is also a great opportunity to teach our kids about Jesus.

The fact that we hold this celebration on December 25 is pretty much arbitrary. It's something we could celebrate any day. Come to think of it, the basic message of Christmas is that God is With Us (Immanuel) and that *is* something we should celebrate every day.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net