

CELEBRATING

125
YEARS

October 8, 2023

Celebrating with our Forefathers

*"The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep
darkness, on them has light shone. Isaiah 9:2*

Late one cold December night, Martin Luther was walking home through the woods when he noticed the stars shining through the boughs of the evergreen trees. He was so enthralled by a starlit tree and how it reminded him of the star over Bethlehem. He cut down the tree, took it home, and decorated it with candles to encourage his family through a cold dark winter. He said that the evergreen represented the eternal love of God and the steadfastness of their own faith. The candles represented the star that led the Wise Men to Christ.

Luther loved Christmas and is credited with moving the gift giving day from December 6th, St. Nicholas Day, to December 24th, Christmas Eve. He also wrote several Christmas hymns including *"From Heaven Above to Earth I Come."*

The German Lutherans who settled in New Decatur, Alabama in the 1890's brought their Christmas traditions with them. Some of those traditions we still celebrate today.

In a meeting on Christmas Day in 1899, the congregation decided to donate the Christmas Day offering to the New Orleans Orphanage, a Christmas tradition that continued until the donation was given to the Bethlehem Orphanage. In 2006, this donation was changed to the Bethesda Lutheran Home in Texas and continued through 2014 when the Elders changed the designated giving.

On December 1, 1903, the congregation decided to buy its first Christmas tree. Once Christmas was over, the limbs of the Christmas tree would be stripped from the trunk and the tree became the Lenten Cross which stood in the sanctuary throughout Lent. In 2005 with the departure of Pastor Dave Lewis, Pastor Reinhardt strongly suggested that we start using an artificial Christmas tree due to fire insurance concerns. He felt that decision should be made before we called a new pastor. The cross from the last live tree still stands in the sanctuary during Lent.

Another decision that was made at that meeting in 1899 was to buy Christmas presents for the children of the congregation. Members who grew up at St. Paul's remember the Christmas children's program was held at 6:00 pm on Christmas Eve. Gifts for the children of the congregation were put under the tree. After the program, Pastor Reinhardt would call each child name, give them their Christmas present, and give them a bag of candy. Pam Meadows remembers attending the Christmas Eve service at the Presbyterian church with her extended family and then coming to St. Paul's for the Christmas program. Her cousins came to church with her so they could also get a bag of candy. Another member remembers that if there were extra bags of candy, they would be given to children of guests attending the service. Sometimes Pastor Reinhardt would give a candy bag to an adult because they had been "good" throughout the year. As a side note, the minutes of the Ladies Auxiliary from the 1940's and 1950's record the motions to purchase the candy for the children's candy bags as well as candy for the shut-ins.

Even though it is not considered a traditional Christmas carol, the congregation sang Pastor Reinhardt's favorite Christmas carol, *"Edelweiss,"* every Christmas Eve.

Those who supplied and decorated the Christmas tree have changed over the years. In 1932, Louis Nebrig and William Pappenburg were appointed to provide the tree. At the same time, F. L. Nebrig was put in charge of decorating the tree, because, at 6' 6", he was the tallest man in the congregation and seemed the obvious choice. Later, the tree was supplied by Bud Kurz from his farm, and the tree was decorated variously by volunteers from the congregation, the Trustees and their families, the Inbetweeners, the Asher family and the Youth Groups, and the Bosco/Nicholson families.

Another longstanding tradition is the Giving Tree. The Prophets Youth Group organized the gift tags that were put on the tree with items listed for at least 5 sponsored families needs and/or wants. Members of the congregation would take a tag from the tree, buy the gift indicated, and return the gift to the church. The Prophets then wrapped the gifts. As part of the event, the Lutheran Women in Mission (LWM) donated money to the Prophets to help with the gift buying and wrapping. They also provide funds and do the grocery shopping to provide groceries for the families. On a designated day, the families would come to church to pick up their gifts and groceries.

Over time other traditions began and some were discontinued. While he served as Associate Pastor, Pastor Dave Lewis started the 11:00 pm Christmas Eve Service as a way of involving the high school students in the planning and execution of the service. They conducted the entire service except for the sermon. In the early years of this service, the goal was to finish by midnight so that the bell would ring at exactly midnight. It took several years, but this timing was eventually accomplished. Today, the service is timed so that the bell rings at midnight, or close to it, to usher in the birthday of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Even before this congregation was organized in 1898, those early worshippers gathered to worship on Christmas Day and to celebrate the birthday of their Lord and Savior. This was a significant expression of their faith in Jesus. It is up to us today to continue this tradition and remember that without Christmas there would be no Easter.

So, when you put up and decorate your tree this year, take a moment and remember Luther's words about the evergreen and the lights. We follow in the traditions of those who came before us sharing in their expressions of faith in their Lord and Savior. We also can celebrate this Christmas season with joy and gladness and look forward to Easter.

In 1535, Martin Luther wrote *"From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"* his children and to be used as part of family's Christmas Eve devotion. This hymn is based on the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth. Three verses from this hymn are included below.

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

My heart for very joy doth leap,
My lips no more can silence keep;
I, too, must sing with joyful tongue,
That sweetest ancient cradle song.

Glory to God in highest heaven,
Who unto man His Son hath given,
While angels sing with tender mirth,
A glad new year to all the earth.

Martin Luther

Beth Hornish and Ron Fritze