

Christmas: The Most Wonderful Day of the Year?

Welcome to This Is America with VOA Learning English. Barbara Klein and Steve Ember have our special holiday report.

For millions of Americans, the most wonderful day of the year is December 25 -- Christmas.

For one thing, it marks the end of the most busy time of year. Many people need a rest after weeks of buying gifts, going to parties, organizing travel and getting their homes ready for the holiday.

With all this, it is often said that Christmas has lost its meaning as the birthday of Jesus Christ. Some churches in the United States have cancelled Christmas Day services, so people can spend the day with their families.

These churches still offer Christmas Eve services, though. And many Christians still go to church on Christmas Day or the night before. They consider it an important part of celebrating the holiday.

Another important part of the Christmas season is music. Among traditional carols, one of the most popular is "Silent Night."

Most Americans identify themselves as Christian, even if they are not very religious. But the freedom to choose any religion, or no religion at all, is guaranteed by the Constitution. The Constitution separates religion and government.

Yet each year brings disputes over holiday observances that some may see as too religious for public schools or other public places.

Others say the real problem is too much political correctness — things like saying "Happy Holidays" when people mean "Merry Christmas." They say people should not be so worried about the risk of offending a stranger.

But not all Americans celebrate Christmas. And even those who do might not celebrate it as a religious holiday. This is true of Christians as well as non-Christians. Still, they treat it as a special day.

And it is hard to think of anyone that Christmas is more special for than children. Of course, this has a lot to do with the tradition of a kindly old man with a big belly and a bright red suit. Children know Santa Claus as the one who leaves gifts under the tree on Christmas Eve.

But only if they are good little children and go to sleep.

Stores crowded with holiday gift buyers may be good for the economy. But some people celebrate Christmas in less material ways. For example, they volunteer to serve meals at shelters for the homeless or visit old people in nursing homes. To them, this is honoring the true spirit of Christmas.

Christmastime centers on home and family.

Once people bring home a Christmas tree, they may struggle with setting it up so it does not fall over. But then they enjoy decorating it with colorful lights and ornaments.

In some families, the tradition is to open gifts on Christmas Eve. In others, though, people wait until Christmas morning to open their presents.

A big Christmas dinner is a tradition in many families. And so are special treats like Christmas cookies covered in powdered sugar.

Many people travel long distances to be home with their families at Christmas. But not everyone is able to be with loved ones. For some, Christmas can be a lonely time. Most businesses and public places are closed for the holiday. But some restaurants stay open and serve Christmas dinner.

A retired man in Washington, D.C., says he enjoys his Christmas dinner at a local restaurant. In fact, he says that after spending several Christmases there, he has become friends with other people who spend their Christmases there, too.

Caroling is a Christmas tradition that goes back hundreds of years. Sometimes carolers walk along a street and the group stops at each house to sing a song. Other times they gather in a public place. Carolers may visit places like shopping centers, hospitals and nursing homes. School choruses are often invited to sing songs of the holiday season.

And, of course, caroling can be found in churches. Listen as the choir of Trinity Church in Boston sings "Carol of the Bells."

December is usually also the time of the ancient Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. The eight-day Festival of Lights honors the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabees defeated King Atiochus of Syria.

Most black Americans celebrate Christmas. But after Christmas, from December 26 to January 1, many also celebrate Kwanzaa. This African-American holiday honors culture, community and family. The name comes from a Swahili term meaning "first fruits." Kwanzaa started during the 1960s, an important period in the modern civil rights movement.

For many children, a favorite Christmas tradition is watching a performance of the ballet "The Nutcracker." The Russian composer Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky wrote the music in 1891. "The Nutcracker" is a story told in dance about a young girl named Clara.

Clara is celebrating Christmas with her family and friends. One of her gifts is a wooden nutcracker shaped like a toy soldier. Clara is shown how to put a nut in the mouth to break the shell open with the head. But she dreams that the nutcracker comes to life as a good-looking prince.

We leave you now with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy performing "The Waltz of the Flowers" from "The Nutcracker."