

# CHRISTMAS

John 3:16

## A CHRISTMAS PLAY

An on-the-scene radio broadcast of Christmas Day in an Armenian Church. Participants: Eight experts, commentator, narrator.

**Commentator:** Good morning. Today we are fortunate to be at (name) Armenian Church in (city), (state). We are here to narrate an ancient sacramental, the ceremony of the Blessing of Water. Right now, Christmas “Badarak” is in progress. But we have a group of parishioners, experts on the Christmas season in the Armenian Church, to talk with us. Good morning, (name), thank you for being with us. Could you please tell the listening audience what the Christmas message is.

**First Expert:** Thank you, (name), I’d be most happy to tell you. (Enthusiastically).

Christmas brings to us one extraordinary message. God, the creator of the universe and everything in it became man. He did this in order for us to understand that he is all-powerful, all-knowing, and always present as a loving, caring, personal God. He created us out of love and desires us to love him above all else and to love one another, no more or no less than we love ourselves. God wants us to be reconciled to him, and to one another, and for this purpose his Son was born in a manger,

lived the perfect life, taught and healed, suffered and died, and was resurrected and ascended to God the Father. Only through him and the submission of our will to his, will we have peace on earth, good will toward humanity, and eventual victory over death.

**Commentator:** Thank you, (name). My next question is for (name). Would you please give us some background information about the Christmas season.

**Second Expert:** Well, this is the way I see it, (name).

In the Armenian Church, the Christmas season begins fifty days before the actual day of Christmas. The church calendar refers to this fifty day period, from November 17 to December 29, as the Quinquagesima before Theophany or as Advent. The Armenian word for this period is “Hisnag.”

During the Advent season, we anticipate, once again, the coming of our Lord into our lives. This special season of the church year helps us prepare for our Lord and the message of love and peace that he brings to each of us at Christmas.

**Commentator:** Thank you, (name). My next question is for (name). I understand that two weeks before Christmas you have

Avak Doner. What does that refer to?

**Third Expert:** The second week preceding Christmas is referred to as Avak Doner (Greater Feasts) and is dedicated to saints of the Church.

The saints commemorated two weeks before Theophany are first King David, the most illustrious of the ancestors of Jesus. As you recall God promised that Christ would be born of King David's family.

A day is dedicated to St. James, a cousin of Jesus, who afterward became the first bishop of Jerusalem. It is on the site of his house that the present St. James Armenian Cathedral in Jerusalem is built.

St. Stephen, the first among the followers of Jesus to be martyred, is remembered.

A day is set aside for Sts. Peter and Paul, the two who have played the greatest role in spreading Christianity by their preaching and writing.

We also commemorate the two brothers, St. James the Elder and St. John the Gospel writer, for their great zeal, devotion, and love for Christ.

**Commentator:** Thank you, (name). The next question is for (name). Isn't fasting part of your celebration of Advent?

**Fourth Expert:** That's right (name).

The first and last weeks of Advent are weeks of fasting. These weeks of fasting as well as the entire season of Quinquagesima are considered as a reminder of the proclamation of St. John the Baptist concerning the coming of Christ and is intended to be an earnest invitation to all to repent and prepare for his coming.

The week's fast is broken after Christmas communion is taken on Christmas eve or at Christmas Day badarak which used to begin at sunrise.

**Commentator:** I see, thank you. My next question is for (name). What other traditions do you have for the Christmas season?

**Fifth Expert:** Home Blessing is a tradi-

tional practice at Theophany. Another tradition is that friends bring together those who have had disagreements; and disputes are settled, wrongs are forgiven and ill feelings forgotten. The Christmas season offers us a new beginning and we sorely need it because throughout the year we err; we love ourselves in a self-centered, selfish way and we tend to forget God and others.

We have a beautiful, meaningful service on the eve of Theophany, "Jrakalooytz." Vespers are held followed by the reading of Old Testament books tracing our salvation history from Genesis through the prophets which tell of the coming of the Messiah.

**Commentator:** Thank you, I've heard the term Epiphany. Exactly what does that mean, (name)?

**Sixth Expert:** Epiphany or "Haydnootoon" is the time that Christ is made known to the Gentiles.

Epiphany embraces the meeting of the three wise men and the Christ child. (Matthew 2:1-12) The Magi represent the non-Jew and the spreading of Christianity throughout the world.

Each of the wise men presented a gift of special significance. The gold represents Christ's kingly powers, the frankincense, his spiritual powers, and the myrrh, his prophetic powers.

**Commentator:** Thank you, (name). I'm going to ask (name) to summarize what all of this means to each of us personally.

**Seventh Expert:** The way I see it, the Christmas season observances culminating with the Blessing of the Water invite us to make a new commitment to Christ.

We are wired to receive the power and graces inherent in our relationship as children of God at baptism, but the final turning on of the switch to receive the power and the graces must be done by each individual with a personal decision to live according to God's will and to give his life

to Christ.

Any ritual, however beautiful, fails if it is observed for the sake of ritual.

The ritual becomes a meaningful expression of faith only when those who are present are not witnesses alone, but participants with proper intent.

A ritual will become a source of power and strength if we go beyond what we see and hear and enter the presence of God with humility and love.

**Commentator:** Thank you. Well put, (name). They are just about ready to begin the Blessing of the Water. Before they do, would you, (name), please tell us why the Armenian Church observes Christmas today, rather than on December 25, and tell us what's been happening here today and what we are about to witness.

**Eighth Expert:** Most happy to, (name). Christmas is celebrated in the Armenian Church on the sixth of January and on the Sunday following. At one time all Christian Churches celebrated the birth of Christ on this day. The Armenians had no reason to change the day; therefore, they have remained faithful to the ancient custom throughout the centuries. This practice has been most beneficial to our Church.

After the western festivities of December 25 and New Year's Eve have passed, the Armenian Church gives its full attention to the religious and spiritual significance of the feast of Theophany which in Armenian is "Asd-vadz-a-haydnootiun," the appearance of God among men. Christ began his human life through his birth and, with his baptism, began his public life and ministry.

During Divine Liturgy on this day, special hymns or "sharagans" are sung. Following the Badarak of Advent, the celebration of Epiphany culminates in the Blessing of Water or "Churorhnek." Long ago, this ceremony which commemorates the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan by St. John the Baptist was held by the riverside. But now for convenience, the ceremony has been confined to the interior of the churches.

The ceremony of the Blessing of the Water is a ritual which consists of prayers, hymns, Bible readings and the blessing and consecration of the water.

All rituals have power. They express the truth about our lives and they make that truth present. They provide the continuity we need to survive in the midst of change. Through the truth in the ritual, we express who we have been, who we are, and who we hope to be.

We Christians engage in ritual to express a faith which is often too difficult to verbalize. Our worship rituals tangibly celebrate the hidden meaning of our experiences in relationship with God and with others.

The ceremony of the Blessing of the Water — "Churorhnek" — is the reenactment of the baptism of Christ which reveals to us the triune presence of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This ceremony calls us to make a new commitment to Christ through new insights into our own baptisms which were sealed at the time of our confirmation or "Gnoonk" which took place following our baptism.

Let us look at the ceremony of the Blessing of the Water to achieve a fuller share in this particular Holy Tradition, worship, and life of our community.

**Commentator:** Thank you, (name). Now, down to (name), who will be speaking to you from the sanctuary. Those of you here with me, feel free to add your comments at any time.

**Narrator:** Thank you, (name). What an inspiring ceremony this is. (Reverently begins to play the tape of the *sharagans* as they are mentioned in the narration.)

During the singing of the hymn "Looyse ee Looso" by the choir, the priest brings, covered with a silken cloth, a silver dove containing Holy Oil or *Muron* from the side altar to the bowl of water which has been placed on the bema. The deacons and the Godfather of the Cross accompany the priest in the procession to and from the side altar.

The translation of "Looy's ee Looso" is:

Light from Light

*Light from Light, you were sent from the Father, and were incarnate, made man, from the Holy Virgin to regenerate corrupted Adam. You, O God, appeared on earth and walked among us, and saved the universe from the curse on Adam.*

**First Expert:** The redeemer who has appeared this day burns up our sins with water, and quenches the world by the divine water.

Christ is baptized and all creatures are sanctified. He gives us forgiveness of sins, sanctifying us by water and the Spirit.

**Narrator:** As the priest pours water cross-wise into the basin, he recites from the Psalms, chapter 29, which refers to the voice of the Lord being heard upon the water. This implies that the strength of God is greater than the majesty of oceans and rivers.

The scriptural reading is from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 12, that we will receive salvation from water.

The next reading comes from the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 10. St. Paul recalls that all men were born with original sin, self-centeredness, or pride, passed from serfdom in Egypt to the sacrifice of Christ.

**Second Expert:** The Gospel reading is from the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 3, in which the baptism of Christ at the River Jordan by St. John the Baptist is described.

This reading is followed by a litany which is chanted. We pray for the descent of the Holy Spirit into the water and for the rebirth of those who will be baptized and thus become children of light and truth as we have through our baptisms. We pray that the water will be for the healing of souls and bodies.

**Narrator:** The Prayer of St. Basil of Caesarea is said over the water by the priest. The prayer begins with the creation

of the earth and man and the necessity of the incarnation of Christ, continues with the promise to those who come to Christ, of rest for all who are weary and heavy laden. The prayer speaks of the Triune Godhead being manifested at Christ's baptism. The prayer ends with a request that the Holy Spirit will bless the water for the building-up of homes, for the healing of the sick, for the salvation of souls and bodies and for goodness in fulfillment of all needs.

While the choir sings "Ov Zarmanali," the cross is taken from the godfather and placed in the water.

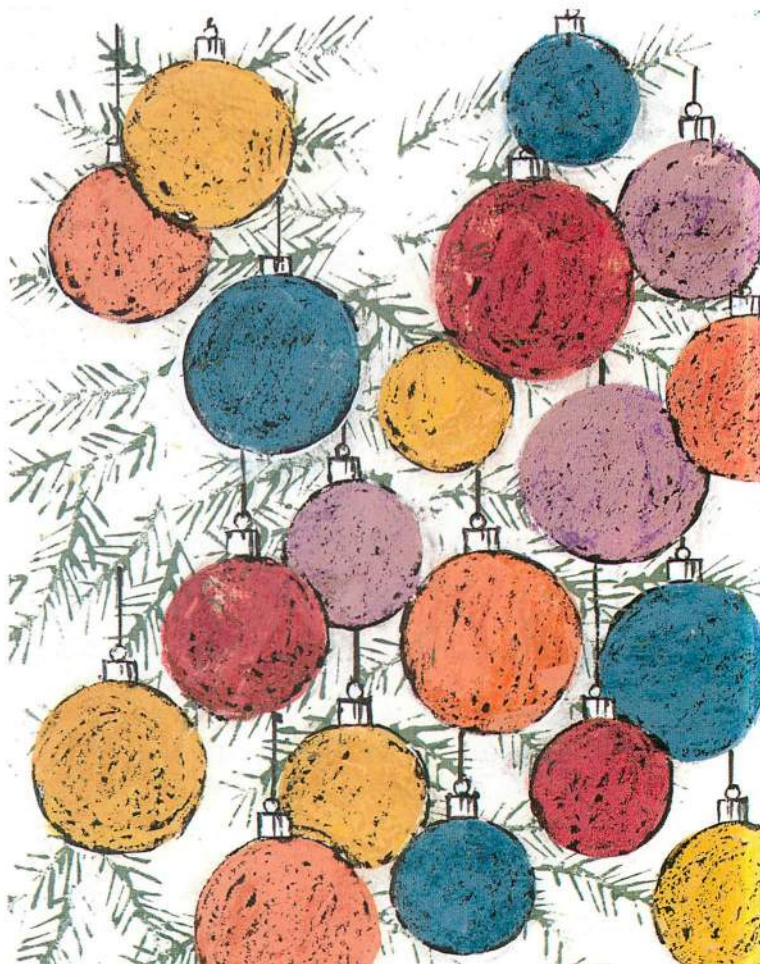
The translation of "Ov Zarmanali, khorhoort ays medz" is:

*O Wonderful and Great Mystery*

*O wonderful and great mystery made manifest! God the Creator coming to Jordan.*

*O river, fear not, for I am thy Creator, I have come to baptize and wash away the sins of men.*

**Third Expert:** This is what our baptism



has accomplished for us. God so loved us that he gave us his only begotten Son. At our baptism, our spiritual births, we were made Christians, Children of God and co-heirs of Christ.

**Narrator:** The hymn, "Aysor Tsaynun Hayragan," follows.

The words, "Aysor Tsaynun Hayragan," mean:

*Today the Voice of the Father*

*This day the well pleased voice of the Father came down from heaven, as witness to the Beloved Son. Exhort, O river Jordan, with exultant voice sang John the Great Forerunner.*

**Fourth Expert:** The cross is taken out of the water and the water is blessed by the priest. This blessing is repeated three times.

**Narrator:** The translation of the blessing is:

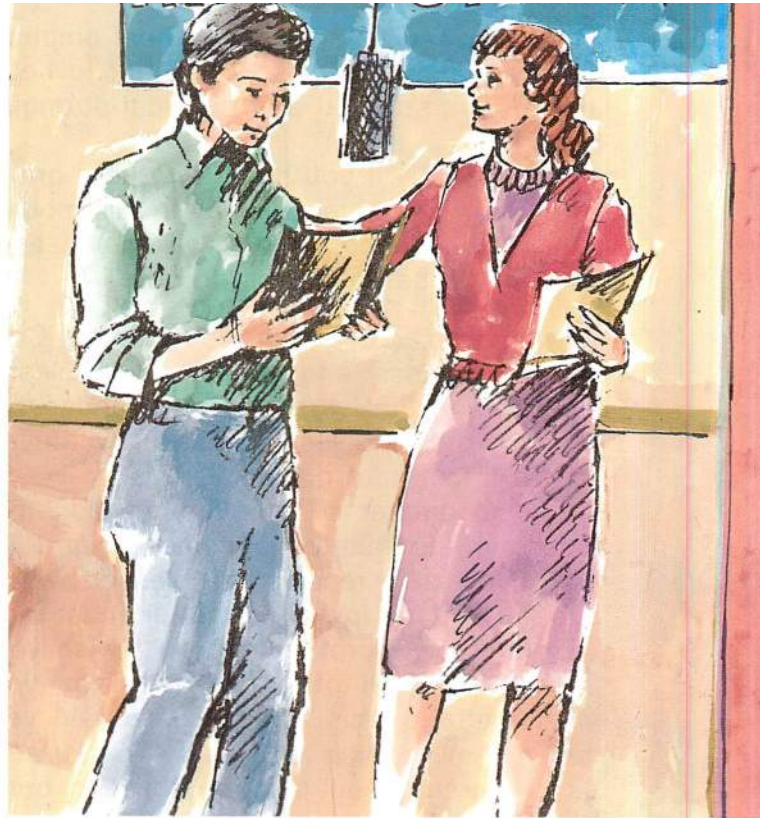
Blessing

Blessed and sanctified be this water, by the sign of this Holy Cross, and the Holy Gospel, and the Holy Oil and through the grace of this day; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

**Fourth Expert:** At the baptism of Christ (God the Son), the Spirit of God (the Holy Spirit) descended like a dove and a voice from heaven (God the Father) said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." By these words the divinity of Christ was revealed to the world and the triune presence of God was made known.

As one of the early Church fathers, St. Athanasius, has said: "The Son of God became a son of man, in order that sons of men may some day appear in heaven as sons of God."

We must not be onlookers; we must participate in this baptismal ceremony. We must rededicate ourselves each year as we receive the graces of the Holy Spirit through the blessed water. Jesus said in



the Gospel according to St. John, "Unless a man be born again of water and of spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

**Narrator:** The water is also consecrated with Holy Oil, and the hymn, "Arakelo Aghavno," is sung.

The translation of "Arakelo Aghavno" is:

*The Dove that was sent came down from on high with a great sound and like the flashing of light he armed the disciples with fire while they were seated in the upper room.*

*The Dove immaterial, unsearchable, that searches the deep counsels of God and, taking the same from the Father, tells of the awful second coming, hath been declared consubstantial with the Father and the Son.*

*Blessing in the highest to him that proceedeth from the Father, to the Holy Spirit, through whom the apostles drank the immortal cup and invited the earth to heaven.*

**Fifth Expert:** Our Church fathers emphasized the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and to give spiritual and physical strength to us.

Jesus said: "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move hence,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."

**Narrator:** The priest pronounces the Collect of Dismissal and gives the final blessing, praying that we will remain under the protection of the Holy Cross in whatever we do throughout our daily lives.

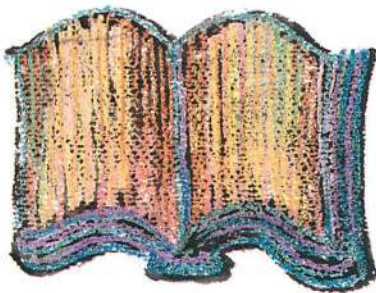
The Godfather of the Cross holds the cross for the faithful to come forward to kiss. They also receive the blessed water and go out to joyfully greet friends with "Shnorhavor Soorp Dzunoont" (I wish you a Christmas full of grace) or "Tzez yev mez medz avedis: Krisdos dzunav yev haydnetsav," which is to say. "To you and us the great good tidings: Christ is born and revealed among us." And we respond, "Orhnial eh haydnootiunun Krisdosee" (Blessed is the revelation of Christ).

**Commentator:** Thank you, one and all. May the Prince of Peace fill your hearts with joy and contentment throughout the New Year.

## At-Home-Work

*I JOURNAL ENTRY. Read over "Selfishness Doesn't Pay," and respond to the questions.*

*II. Next, read "Christmas Insights" and respond to the Personal Inventory.*



*III. Bible readings to do at home with family. Go over today's lesson, too.*

*Monday*

John 3:16, Matthew 2:1-12

*Tuesday*

Psalms 29:2-4

*Wednesday*

Isaiah 12:3-6

*Thursday*

I Corinthians 10:1-4

*Friday*

Matthew 3:1-17

*Saturday*

Luke 3:21-22

*IV. Read and study next week's material.*

## Selfishness Doesn't Pay

My story takes place when I was about eight years old. For as far back as I can remember, my parents put a great deal of time and energy into teaching me the difference between right and wrong, while placing special emphasis on how wrong selfishness was.

This particular episode happened about two weeks before Christmas. Like most children, I had high expectations as to what gifts I would receive. This was probably exaggerated, in my case, by being an only child, used to a great deal of attention.

Early one Saturday morning my mother and father informed me that this year they had decided to spend a good deal of their time picking out gifts for needy children. They asked if I would like to come along to help. Despite my disappointment and annoyance at their spending time and money on another child, I decided to go. The day seemed endless, as we roamed up and down aisles in department stores. While I, feeling sorry for myself, helped by picking out every item in the store that I despised. My bad attitude was brought to my attention more than once, but to no avail.

Well, the day ended and so did all the others, and suddenly it was Christmas. By this time I had completely forgotten about the episode just mentioned. In fact, the only thing I could think about was opening all the fascinating packages. As I began, however, I soon discovered that each one contained one of the gifts that I had selected. By the time I finished opening my presents, I had learned about selfishness in a way I never would forget. You see, my parents were not sure what to buy for me that year, so they dreamed up a story to let me select my own presents.

Nancy Reifsnider

#### TO THINK AND WRITE ABOUT:

1. Have you ever felt sorry for yourself? How did you act? Why?
2. Why is it easier to think of ourselves rather than others?
3. Do you have gift ideas for everyone on your Christmas list? Or are you only thinking about what you want to receive?



## Christmas Insights

We all look forward to the coming of Christmas. It is a time filled with expectation, festive activities, and celebration. And every year we hear someone say, "What has happened to Christmas?" as they stand in the midst of it. What are these people really asking? In department stores we find displays of Santa, reindeer, and elves even before the Thanksgiving turkey is bought. In churches we begin the celebration leading toward Christmas with Advent. For four weeks churches present special programs preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus on Christmas.

But even with all this activity it often seems that the true meaning of Christmas is pushed to the back shelf. Some people worry about selecting the right gifts to give, whom to invite to parties or dinners, whether they will receive the things they want; and some people end up becoming quite depressed. Other people seem to find a special joy and happiness in the Christmas celebration that they share with those around them. How do you feel about the coming of Christmas? What do you believe about this annual celebration?

#### Personal Inventory

1. What important things should I do to get ready for Christmas?
2. Am I spending too much money on gifts and forgetting the meaning of the gifts?
3. Am I spending enough time with my family?
4. What does God want me to do to prepare for and celebrate the birth of Jesus?
5. How would you celebrate the birth of Jesus if you could do anything you wanted to do?