



# CHRISTMAS

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, December 25, 2011**

**(See the Worship Unit for amazing ideas for Christmas celebrations.)**

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### **I. Etymology**

**Christmas**<sup>1</sup> late O.E. *Cristes mæsse*, from *Christ* (but retaining the original vowel sound) + *mass* (2). Written as one word from mid-14c. *Father Christmas* first attested in a carol attributed to Richard Smart, Rector of Plymtree (Devon) from 1435–77. *Christmas tree* in modern sense first attested 1835 in Amer.Eng., from Ger. *Weihnachtsbaum*. Christmas cards first designed 1843, popular by 1860s. *Christmastide* is from 1620s. *Christmas Eve* is M.E. *Cristenmesse Even*.

### **Good Morning Sister Mary** (African American Christmas Carol)

Good morning Sister Mary  
What're you gonna call your little baby boy?  
Well I think I'll call him Jesus  
Such a pretty name is Jesus  
God keeps holding him  
God keeps holding him  
God keeps holding him in his hands...

### **II. Arriving in a Dangerous World**

Arriving into a dangerous world, when we began to come to ourselves in this land, there were stories about one who was sent to save the world, who would lead and teach, who had all power, who could and did raise from the dead, and who, if we followed him, would never leave us. This was one who came, like so many of us, through a young girl-woman not yet married, which was one of the unwelcoming ways to come into her community and yet she was protected by one named Joseph, who become a husband to a pregnant maiden. To be accessible this one who is light of light came as a baby from the

womb of a woman with an adopted human father and a heavenly father. Somehow word began to circulate about this baby being born, and people came to find and worship and welcome and honor him, and others came to kill him.

Arriving into an unfriendly world, warned of danger, his parents fled with him to Egypt. Our celebrations of Christmas usually center around the blessing of the gift of a child whose life opens the way to life beyond life. And there is much celebration. However, we also in this unit want to focus on the aspect of this coming that has the family fleeing because of danger.

Where do you go when you come to yourself and your very existence is a threat to others who control the region in which you find yourself? Africans captured in our homes, with our families sucked up into a vile, vicious system of slavery, found ourselves in a dangerous situation on multiple levels. Arriving alive on the other side of the Atlantic is a journey of danger and enslavement that spends out more than 4 centuries in time. We did not control our bodies, our labor, our children, where and when we could move around, we did not own ourselves.

How does one escape? African American culture reveals an unending number of ways in which we struggled, thus creating a culture of struggle and a culture of reaching out for anything that seemed to suggest that those who enslaved us were evil. Knowing that we were not who they said we were, even when we did not know our African reality, we searched for ways to construct a future that affirmed our right as humans of dignity. We found a lot in the religion that the slave owners practiced after we re-fashioned it. And we began to move to the light of a Savior who was open and accepting.

Another concept that we utilized was that we could risk being alive by doing as the parents of Jesus did and try to escape.

**Map 1 - The Travels of Jesus as a Child and Young Man c 6BC-AD27**



- [1] c 6BC - The **Birth of Jesus** at Bethlehem (Luke 2:4-7)
- [2] Jesus is taken as a baby to Jerusalem for **presentation at the Temple** (Luke 2:22)
- [3] c 4BC - Joseph and Mary take Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt **to escape the “massacre of the infants”** by Herod the Great (Matthew 2:13-18)
- [4] c 3BC - Joseph returns to Palestine from Egypt, but discovers Archelaus (a brutal man, later deposed) is now ruler of Samaria and Judea. The **family settles in Nazareth in Galilee** (Matthew 2:19-23)

Africans entered America by force as slaves and property. . . . “Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come” . . . and as we journeyed through days, weeks, months, years and centuries, we evolved a culture of survival, accommodation, resistance, multi-layered channeling, reaching for tomorrow. We began to hear about one who is present beyond death and

as close as our very breath,  
and is for the poor and for the despised.  
Holding on to that light,  
we begin to walk in danger toward freedom and transformation.  
When we find some—any—piece of it for ourselves.  
We tell the story of that which comes from walking in that which is ‘light’  
so that  
every generation can also come to a place  
where they can chose to not walk in darkness  
but instead. . . risk offering your life so you might lose it to live again.  
As did Jesus who was born in danger.

What does one do to move through an unthinkable beginning to sprout a new life?  
African Americans moved with twin motions day by day doing enough to stay alive and day by day seeking a way to transform that life.

We begin to hear about a child who was born in danger and escaped to live a life promising everlasting life. A poet, a healer, a landless king, whose people were those who chose to follow, whose land was wherever he was. . . who as a young man was killed because he challenged that which was corrupt and he promised that those who followed him would walk in light and understanding. And so we did and we do follow Jesus centuries since he walked this planet and we still hold up his name.

And as for our journeying, we began to increase our walking in danger, risking our lives to create the possibility of a new life for those in our line coming after us. And we charge every generation to pull light from darkness as did the child who was born in Bethlehem.

Our journey had stages. First there was the wondering about how it is that we were where we were . . .

**Lord How Come Me Here?**

Lord, How come me here?

Lord, How come me here?  
Lord, How come me here?  
I wish I never was born

There aint no freedom here Lord  
There aint no freedom here  
There aint no freedom here  
I wish I never was born

They treat me so mean here Lord  
They treat me so mean here  
They treat me so mean here  
I wish I never was born

They sold my children away Lord  
They sold my children away  
They sold my children away  
I wish I never was born

Lord, How come me here?  
Lord, How come me here?  
Lord, How come me here?  
I wish I never was born  
I wish I never was born  
I wish I never was born.<sup>2</sup>

Then as we wake up to our reality, we are called to consider whether we have to accept it if it is unjust and if it is indecent. Then can we walk righteously and just go along at the same time? Then we remember the story of the baby born in such danger, his parents had to run to another place until it was safe for them to return. And return he did and he grew to call others to follow him and they did. When he returned he criticized pollution where he found it, urging those within the sound of his voice to turn from that which is unjust. Those he accused of pollution decided he had to go—so they killed him. And he died, yet did not die. The light of his life and teachings continue to shine through the centuries. He lives in the communities that have come together in his name; he lives in the church; he lives in struggles for justice; he is renewed in baptisms by water and fire. We who carried the fire called ourselves Christians. Which led to the next step—dangerous journeying.

### **I'm a Rolling Thru an Unfriendly World**

I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin'  
I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly worl'  
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin'  
I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly worl'  
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin'  
I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly worl'

I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin'  
I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly worl'

O, brothers, won't you help me  
O, brothers, won't you help me to pray  
Oh, brothers, won't you help me  
Won't you help me in de service of de Lord

O, sisters, won't you help me  
O, sisters, won't you help me to pray  
Oh, sisters, won't you help me  
Won't you help me in de service of de Lord.<sup>3</sup>

Another spiritual served in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century struggles against racial oppression. The video provided features a version of the song; it is sung by Mahalia Jackson.

### **I'm on My Way to Canaan Land (I'm on My Way to Freedom Land)**

I'm on my way, don't you wanna go  
I'm on my way, don't you wanna go  
I'm on my way, don't you wanna go  
I'm on my way, great God I'm on my way...  
I asked my mother, come and go with me  
I ask my father...  
I ask my brother...  
I ask my sister...  
If you don't go, don't hinder me...  
If you don't go, going anyhow.<sup>4</sup>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o7GnV30kJA>

### **III. Having a Baby in Dangerous Quarters**



Diane Nash Bevel

Civil Rights activist and leader Diane Nash Bevel, a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had already served thirty days in jail in Rock Hill, South Carolina, before going to jail in Mississippi. She went to jail many more times during the Movement. She was an expert strategist in civil disobedience. Time and time again African Americans were unjustly jailed for upholding the right amidst the dangers they faced. Diane Nash Bevel took a stand. Being six months pregnant, facing a two-year sentence, and willing to deliver her baby in circumstances that could definitely be described as dangerous, she proceeded with divine guidance. Just as Jesus was delivered into an unfriendly world, so would this Bevel child be in hopes that generations to come would share in a more perfect Union. When questioned about her decision, she replied,

“To appeal further would necessitate my sitting through another court trial in a Mississippi court, and I have reached the conclusion that I can no longer cooperate with the evil and unjust court system of this state. I subscribe to the philosophy of nonviolence; thus to one of the basic tenets of nonviolence—that you refuse to cooperate with evil. The only condition under which I will leave jail will be if the unjust and untrue charges against me are completely dropped. Some people asked me how I can do this when I am expecting my first child in September. I have searched my soul about this and considered it in prayer. I have reached the conclusion that in the long run this will be the best thing I can do for my child. Since my child will be a Black child, born in Mississippi, whether I am in jail or not, he will be born in prison. I believe that if I go to jail now it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free, not only on the day of their birth, but for all of their lives.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Go Tell It on the Mountain**

Go, tell it on the mountain  
Over the hills and everywhere  
Go, tell it on the mountain  
That Jesus Christ is born

While shepherds kept their watching  
Over silent flocks by night  
Behold throughout the heavens  
There shone a holy light  
Go, tell it on the mountain  
Over the hills and everywhere  
Go, tell it on the mountain  
That Jesus Christ is born

The shepherds feared and trembled

When lo! above the earth  
Rang out the angels chorus  
That hailed the Savior's birth  
Go, tell it on the mountain...

Down in a lowly manger  
The humble Christ was born  
And God sent us salvation  
That blessed Christmas morn  
Go, tell it on the mountain...

While shepherds kept their watching  
Over silent flocks by night  
Behold throughout the heavens  
There shone a holy light  
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The shepherds feared and trembled  
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The humble Christ was born  
And God sent us salvation  
That blessed Christmas morn  
Go, tell it on the mountain...<sup>6</sup>

During the Civil Rights Movement, police officers would broadcast the location of Civil Rights leaders/activists. This was in an effort to inform those parties that would want to do them harm where they might be found. So during the Civil Rights Movement the Christmas carol "Go Tell It on the Mountain" was changed to a freedom song by Mississippi Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer. Since the police were going to go and tell it, she wanted freedom fighters to go and tell something too:

Go tell it on the mountains  
Over the hills and everywhere,  
Go tell it on the mountains  
To let my people go.

Paul and Silas bound in jail  
Let my people go!  
Had no money to go their bail  
Let my people go!

Had a book was given to me  
Let my people go!  
Every page spelled victory  
Let my people go!

#### **IV. Contemporary Babies Born in Danger**

##### **(A) Born into the Chaos of Katrina: A Midwife's Life-giving Journey**

During the tragedy of Katrina in New Orleans and Mississippi, among the chaos and destruction, babies continued to be born right in its midst. This was a time of great fear and joy.



The ambulance sped toward Baton Rouge, Louisiana, from the New Orleans airport, overrun with refugees from a drowned city. A mother pregnant with twins screamed from labor pains. Robbie Prepas, a nurse and midwife who struggles with car sickness, tried to stay focused. The babies weren't going to wait. Five minutes into the ride, Prepas delivered the first twin with no problem. But then, she saw two feet beginning to emerge—a breech baby. Panic set in. “Don't push! Don't push! Don't push!” Today, five years after delivering those twins in the midst of the chaos that Katrina wreaked, Robbie Prepas dwells, not on the death and destruction that was so well-documented, but on the life that emerged. She and her team delivered 20 healthy babies amid the storm's aftermath in a two-week period. That “changed my life. It's one of those events in America that we should never forget.”

Prepas, now 58, has traveled the world with organizations like Save the Children and UNICEF. She went to Ghana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe in the 1990s to teach midwives in those African countries how best to deal with emergencies. A year before Katrina, she traveled to Afghanistan with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to figure out why so many mothers and babies were dying at a hospital in Kabul.

As Hurricane Katrina spun toward the Gulf, the urge to help came naturally. Based out of San Diego, Prepas was a member of California's Disaster Medical Assistance Team, a group of about 30 physicians, general practitioners, nurses, nurse practitioners, and other specialists. They were told to head to Louis Armstrong International Airport, along with

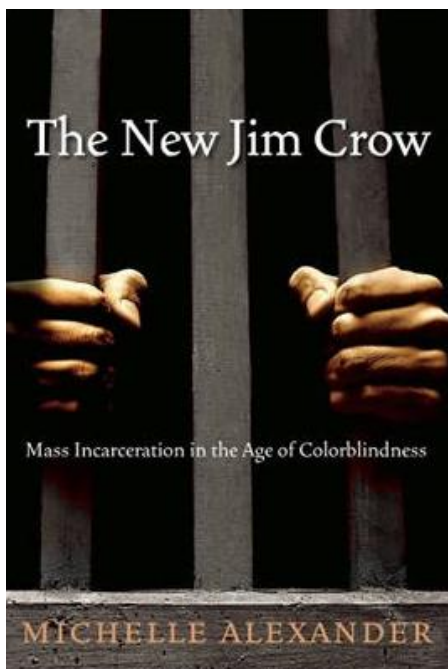


teams from Oregon and Washington. Katrina had swept ashore, and the levee had been breached. “I had never in my life seen such a disaster as I had in New Orleans,” Prepas says. “And, believe me, I’ve seen the worst of everything.” At the airport, thousands of people milled about. Elderly patients from nursing homes had been dropped off, without medications or even adult diapers. Electricity was out, and there was no running water.

“There were two policemen and two security guards,” Prepas continued. “There was no organization. We didn’t know who to answer to. . . . Nobody was in charge.” Prepas and the other 89 medical professionals swung into action. They set up three tents at the front of the airport—green, for walking wounded and pregnant women; yellow, for slightly more serious conditions; red, for critical patients.<sup>7</sup>

### (B) **Black Boys in America, Born into Danger**

A black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance; and a white boy a 1 in 17 chance. A black girl born in 2001 has a 1 in 17 chance of going to prison in her lifetime; a Latino girl a 1 in 45 chance; and a white girl a 1 in 111 chance. The Children’s Defense Fund’s *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* Campaign is a national and community crusade to engage families, youth, communities, and policy makers in the development of healthy, safe, and educated children. Poverty, racial disparities, and a culture of punishment rather than prevention and early intervention are key forces driving the Pipeline.<sup>8</sup>



As the United States celebrates the nation’s “triumph over race” with the election of Barack Obama, the majority of young black men in major American cities are locked behind bars or have been labeled felons for life. Although Jim Crow laws have been wiped off the books, an astounding percentage of the African American community

remains trapped in a subordinate status—much like their grandparents before them. In an incisive critique, former litigator-turned-legal-scholar Michelle Alexander provocatively argues that we have not ended racial caste in America: we have simply redesigned it. Alexander shows that, by targeting black men and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of color blindness. The New Jim Crow challenges the civil rights community—and all of us—to place mass incarceration at the forefront of a new movement for racial justice in America. Here are some statistics that should get and keep our attention:

- There are more African Americans under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.
- As of 2004, more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race.
- A black child born today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child born during slavery. The recent disintegration of the African American family is due in large part to the mass imprisonment of black fathers.
- If you take into account prisoners, a large majority of African American men in some urban areas, like Chicago, have been labeled felons for life. These men are part of a growing under caste—not class, caste—a group of people who are permanently relegated, by law, to an inferior second-class status. They can be denied the right to vote, automatically excluded from juries, and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education, and public benefits—much as their grandparents and great-grandparents once were during the Jim Crow era.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

As we celebrate this Christmas season, let us continue to celebrate the birth of a child who would become Savior. Let us recognize that in our time, like the baby Jesus, we are also daily confronted with dangers seen and unseen. Jesus, born into an unfriendly world, preached a gospel of peace and brought us the gift of salvation unending. What gift shall we give to the Baby this season? Will we make life less dangerous for other babies as they are born?

## Notes

1. [www.Etymonline.com](http://www.Etymonline.com).
2. “Lord, How Come Here?” In addition to the rendition above by Kathleen Battle, see a second rendition. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB-Yq8bfB8c&feature=related>

3. J. W. Johnson and J. R. Johnson. "I'm a Rolling Thru an Unfriendly World." American Negro Spiritual. Online location:  
[http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/i\\_m\\_a\\_rolling.htm](http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/i_m_a_rolling.htm)
4. I'm on My Way to Canaan Land (I'm on My Way to Freedom Land).  
Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o7GnV30kJA>
5. Arsenault, Raymond. Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 480–481.
6. "Go Tell It on the Mountain." Online location:  
[http://www.lyricsmania.com/go\\_tell\\_it\\_on\\_the\\_mountain\\_lyrics\\_kirk\\_franklin.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/go_tell_it_on_the_mountain_lyrics_kirk_franklin.html)
7. Online location: [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-26/living/katrina.babies\\_1\\_nurse-practitioners-healthy-babies-elderly-patients?s=PM:LIVING](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-26/living/katrina.babies_1_nurse-practitioners-healthy-babies-elderly-patients?s=PM:LIVING)
8. Online location: <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/cradle-prison-pipeline-summary-report.pdf>
9. Prison to poverty cycle a new Jim Crow. Online location:  
<http://themoderatevoice.com/89033/the-new-jim-crow/>