



Austrian Holidays, Customs and Traditions

And how we
perceive and
celebrate them at
Noah's Ark
Kindergarten

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1. Advent Season

The people realized very early that special holidays require careful preparation. That is why a time of repentance (= returning to God), fasting and teaching of the basic Christian beliefs was introduced. But, above all, it is a time of **remembering the birth of Jesus** and a time of mental **preparation** for the **return of Christ**.

The preparation time for the Christmas holiday lasts 40 days, which is based on the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert.

Originally, the Advent season started directly after the St. Martin's Festival – Lantern Festival. Back then; Christmas was celebrated on January 6. In the 10th Century, though, the Western Church moved the Christmas celebration to December 25. But now, a solution had to be found for the 40 days fasting period, which with the changed Christmas date would have started during the harvest season. That is why the 40 days were replaced by 4 Advent Sundays.

How we perceive and celebrate this time at our Kindergarten:

For us, the **Advent Season** is a time of silence, during which we reflect on the mystery of Jesus' birth. We want to focus on what is truly important. We also remember that Jesus said he would come back.

Also, St. Nicholas is celebrated during the Advent season. Here, we want to emphasize the principle of sharing. After all, Christmas is about sharing as well. The father shared his son Jesus Christ with us; the angels shared a divine message with Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds; the Wise Men from the East shared gifts with baby Jesus; the shepherds shared and spread the news about the birth of the savior with other people etc.

It always needs 2 people to share... one who gives and another who receives. Out of his great love, God offers us the **gift of reconciliation with him** (starting with Jesus' birth, the gift became complete when Jesus died on the cross for you and me and then rose again) ...**do I accept this gift?**

If the answer is yes, then I am a part of his eternal family. He is my father, Jesus is my brother and savior... then, Christmas actually gets the deeper meaning that it truly bears.

In practice, we perform small dramas with the children, sing Christmas and Advent songs, recite some poetry together and discover the mystery of Christmas.

1.1. St. Martin's Festival – Lantern Festival

On this day the people used to have a rich meal for the last time (origin of the traditional goose meal, "Ganslessen", still popular today) before starting the fasting period that would last until Christmas – the Advent.

The Martin's pretzels ("Martinsbrezeln") and croissants (Martinskipferl), still shared today at the lantern walks remind us of the following fasting period.

The Bible verses of Luke 12:35 ff. – waiting on the Lord Jesus with lamps in their hands – provide the inspiration for the Lantern walk.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

We celebrate the St. Martin's Festival as **Lantern Festival**. Each year there is a different theme depending on the particular project the respective group is preparing... still, the **principle** that we focus on during this festival always remains the same: **SHARING**.

Here are some examples of past themes:

- Family Project: "Martin" – how he shares his bread and his coat with the poor
- Tales Project: "The Star Money" ("Sterntaler") – how the girl shares her bread and everything she owns – except her underwear – with the poor
- Animal Project: "Inside the mitten" – how the animals share their home, ...a mitten, with each other in winter
- Project "Indians and the white people": – how the Indians share corn with the white people who do not have anything to eat anymore.

This is how we teach the legends/stories: They were all **people who loved Jesus and took God's word serious**. They knew that their belongings are gifts of God and that he wants us to share with people who have less than we have or who have nothing at all. But if we **share**, it has to come **from our heart**. God says in his word that if we give, our right hand must not know what our left hand does and vice versa. He wants us to be cheerful givers. God sees our heart.

If we share in thankfulness, knowing that everything we have (even our health, friends, family, etc.) is a gift of God, and if we give joyfully and wholeheartedly to the people that God “places on our heart”, then **we are “light”**. We are light to the people who are grateful for the things they receive, for a smile and friendly words. Yes, we are God’s messengers and we bring “a piece of heaven” to the people; a piece of God, who loves all people. God wants to use us, even the children, and he wants us to be an instrument of his love.

Every group decides individually how to celebrate the festival. Some decide to do a lantern walk while others visit a retirement home. But all groups usually sing songs such as “Ich gehe mit meiner Laterne” (I walk with my lantern); “Laterne, Laterne – Sonne, Mond und Sterne” (Lantern, lantern – sun, moon and stars); This little light of mine; etc. Also, there is usually a small drama and poetry, while pretzels and “Kipferl” (croissants) are shared with parents, pensioners etc. Afterwards, people just enjoy sitting together and spending precious time together.

1.2. St. Nicholas Day

There is not much reliable information about the historical figure of Nicholas, but according to the legends he was very charitable. After the death of his parents he inherited a great fortune with which he decided to help orphans and the poor. At night he would leave small bags with money at their doorsteps. He did not want anybody to know who was blessing him or her. The poor would find the presents and were very thankful. Later – in the middle of the 4th century – Nicholas became bishop (with a bishop's crook and a high hat). He loved the people and helped them wherever he could. Once, there was as great famine. Nicholas crossed the sea in order to buy food for the people and so everybody had enough to eat. It is assumed that Nicholas died on December 6 in the city of Myra.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

We believe that **Nicholas** was a person who loved God and took his word serious. He wanted to please God. Nicholas was rich and many people desire to be rich. But he knew that wealth does not have an eternal value. He knew from God's word that God wants us to **SHARE** and take care of others – especially of orphans, poor people, widows, etc. And this is what Nicholas did. He cared for people's needs.

He left the presents, "the bags of money", at nighttime, because he did not want the people to thank him but God. He knew that after all his possessions did not belong to him but to God. And God rejoices if we allow him to use us for good deeds of his love.

Nicholas already died and is with God, his father, in heaven. He stored up treasures in heaven because he shared his wealth here on earth and took care of others. Nicholas is an example to be followed... this is why we still celebrate him today.

*In **practice**, we have been going to Podersdorf in Burgenland for a few years now. Here, St. Nicholas comes to visit in a horse-drawn carriage. We sing him songs such as "Lasst uns froh und munter sein" (Let's be glad and full of cheer) and recite poetry. Then, St. Nicholas speaks about sharing, being good etc. and tells the children that God "sends him" to give small gifts to them because he loves all of them so much. They can take the gifts home and it would be nice if they shared them with their parents and siblings.*

Then, the children can sit in the horse-drawn carriage, ride a pony or play at the playground before we share a delicious meal together. Afterwards, we take a digestive stroll and walk to the big playground where we have another snack.

1.3. The Advent Wreath

The Protestant pastor Johann Heinrich Wichern (1808 – 1881) from the city of Hamburg has presumably invented Advent Wreath. He opened an institution for the care of youth at risk – the so-called “Rauhes Haus” – and started doing Advent devotions. As part of the devotional time, 24 small candles were placed on a large wooden ring and one was lit every day. With the days passing, the room would get lighter and lighter as the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the “Light of the World”, was getting closer and closer.

Later, it became a tradition to additionally decorate the wheel with fir branches. Since it was difficult to make such big wreaths, 4 candles replaced the 24 candles – one for each Advent Sunday.

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

The Advent Wreath is a symbol of fascination, anticipation and waiting for Christmas.

Burning candles fascinate children and they enjoy lighting a new one every week... they can hardly await. This is how we should be anticipating the return of Jesus Christ. We do not know when he will come, but we are joyfully waiting and anticipating.

Also, the Advent Wreath is a reminder of how we are supposed to be light. This means that we should give warmth, love, joy and help to others. But not just we are to be light... Who is the one who brings light into our lives?

In practice, we sing the Advent song “Wir sagen euch an...” (Now it is Advent...) and say the rhyme “Advent, Advent, ein Lichtlein brennt” (Advent, Advent, a little light burns). We turn the electric lights off so that the candles are more visible. Every day, a different child blows out the candles.

1.4. The Advent Calendar

The origin of the Advent Calendar can be traced back to the 19th century, when the Protestant Church introduced it in order to emphasize the anticipation of Christmas Day.

Gerhard Lang from Munich is considered the inventor of the first printed Advent calendar with paper doors (1908).

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

The Advent calendar is meant to support the anticipation of the birth of Jesus. It is important for children to know how many nights they have to sleep before it is Christmas time. The Advent calendar supports and also emphasizes the children's anticipation of the coming celebration.

At school, there are different Advent calendars in use depending on each group. There are many different Advent calendars on the market – some have pictures, others have sweets, crafts, Christmas songs or stickers – so each group gets to choose which one they would like.

1.5. The Christmas Markets

The Christmas markets first arose in the 13th century when the people started giving presents to each other. In the beginning, only the aristocracy bought their family presents at the markets. Later, the middle class also joined this tradition.

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

Christmas markets, with their decoration and offered goods, represent the sparkling and the anticipation of Christmas, although they mainly exist so that people can buy their presents.

In practice, we usually stroll through the Christmas market at the Schönbrunn palace before we join the Christmas cookie baking inside the palace.

There is a locomotive at the Rathaus Christmas market, which the children like to ride on. Most of the time, many of the parents and grandparents like to come along so that we can split up into smaller groups and get to see every corner of the market. The children usually get something to eat and to drink.

1.6. Christmas:

Christmas Eve / Christmas Day

It was only in the year 1150 that the word “Weihnachten” (derived from “holy night”) became prevalent in the German-speaking world. Before, the word “Christfest” (Christ’s Feast) was widely used.

In the 4th century, the people started focusing more on the salvation through Jesus Christ and on the different parts of the event. Up to this point, the people had only celebrated Easter – the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Now, the aspect of his nativity was emphasized more. The birth of Christ was first celebrated on January 6, but by the 10th century the Western Christian Church had placed Christmas on December 25 (The Romans had been celebrating Christmas on December 25 since the year 275).

Different terms were commonly used, such as “Birth of the Savior” (according to Luke 2:11), “Feast of the Nativity of Christ” or “Feast of the Holy Birth”. It was also called the “Feast of Light”, according to the beginning of the Gospel of John where it speaks about the true light coming into the world.

Christmas Eve

The celebration of Christmas starting in the afternoon or evening of December 24 is a rather new development. It is based on the belief that great feasts should be prepared with prayers the night before. Therefore, the midnight mass (meaning: nighttime Liturgy of Hours) was introduced. In the 17th and 18th century, the Christmas mass was still celebrated in the early morning hours. Later, it was moved further and further into the evening or even the afternoon of the 24th. This is why the distribution of presents at people’s homes was also moved to the evening of the 24th – the Christmas Eve.

Christmas Day

December 25 is the day on which the birth of Jesus is celebrated and people traditionally spend it with their families.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

We usually talk to the children about how they will be celebrating Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

1.7. The Christmas Tree

It is an old tradition to have something evergreen in the house and to light a few candles around Christmas. People believed that this would keep evil spirits out of their homes.

Later, the church gave a new meaning to this tradition, explaining it to be a symbol for Jesus Christ, the true tree of life and the candles – now put on a Christmas tree – are symbolizing Jesus as the light of the world.

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

For us, the **Christmas tree** symbolizes **life**. Jesus says: I am the way, the truth and the life. Jesus formed you and me and gave us life on this earth... he wants to give us eternal life as well. This is why Jesus had to come down to this earth.

The lights/candles symbolize Jesus, who has brought light (hope, love, our salvation) into our dark world.

The sweets symbolize everything that is good, such as sweet moments or the wonderful people God has blessed us with.

The Christmas tree balls (and other sparkling ornaments) symbolize his heavenly glory. Jesus is the king of kings.

In practice, it is up to each person if he or she wants to set up and decorate a Christmas tree or not.

1.8. The Christmas Celebration following the Reformation of Martin Luther

With the Reformation of Martin Luther people started reading the Christmas story from the bible, singing Christmas songs and having certain customs of giving presents.

For a long time it was a demonstration of one's confession if a Christmas tree or a nativity scene was set up on Christmas Eve.

1.9. The Nativity Scence

The reason for setting up a nativity scene at Christmas is found in Luke Chapter 2. Only, this passage does not mention any animals. The representation of an ox and a donkey goes back to a passage in the Old Testament: "The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger." (Isaiah 1:3)

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

The nativity scene is only an illustration for what happened at that time.

In practice, it is up to each person if he or she wants to set up a nativity scene or not. We talk about the Christmas story with the children and allow them to act it out.

1.10. The Christmas Presents

Originally, people with passion would place Christmas presents in front of the manger as an offering. The presents were then passed on to people in need.

In fact, St. Nicholas was the gift giver, but the protestant church soon tried to replace him with the "Christ Child" (Jesus Christ), the real protagonist and giver of all good things.

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

The **gift** of Christmas is Jesus Christ. Sometimes, gifts are vitally important... the real gift of Christmas – the **gift of reconciliation with God** (starting with Jesus' birth and ending with his death at the cross for you and me and his resurrection) – definitely is. **Do I accept this gift?**

If yes, rejoice... because you are a child of God and you will go to heaven when your life on this earth is over. You are a part of his eternal family. God the father is your father, Jesus is your brother and savior... this is when the true meaning of Christmas becomes reality.

The **Christmas gifts** that we give to each other are meant to demonstrate how wonderful it is to receive and be allowed to keep something from someone who loves us – even though we do not deserve it. The person wants to demonstrate to me how much he or she loves me – just as I am – and that he or she thinks of me and regards me as special and valuable. This is exactly how God sees us!

We do not deserve the salvation we have received through Jesus Christ (who had to leave heaven), because we are sinners (being a sinner means that we do things that do not please God). But God always loves us and thinks of us. We are so special and valuable to him that his son offers up his life for us. We do not deserve it, neither do we understand it... but we accept it thankfully... just like any other gift we receive. Merry Christmas!

In practice, the children receive gifts such as games and books for their group.

1.11. Christmas Cookies / Christmas Meals

In Austria, people traditionally have fish – carp – on Christmas Eve and poultry on Christmas Day. Pastries and desserts (marzipan, fruit stollen cake, cookies etc.) are also considered essential.

How we perceive and celebrate this at our Kindergarten:

We think this tradition is “yummy”!

In practice, we bake cookies with the children and eat them at our Christmas party. Mmmh!

2. Valentine’s Day

The following legend about the origin of Valentine’s Day has not been verified: “In the 3rd century Claudius II Gothicus was the emperor of Rome. He was known as “Claudius the Cruel” because he was an especially cruel leader and engaged in many wars during which he mistreated his own people. After a while, it became difficult for him to find enough soldiers.

Claudius thought that young men did not want to become soldiers anymore because they did not want to leave their “loved ones” or “families” behind. He therefore decided to cancel all marriages and engagements in Rome. Thousands of young couples lost their hope to be married due to an edict issued by an oppressor. And it seemed as if nobody dared to protest against this cruel ruler.

There was one simple Christian priest named Valentine, though, who stood up for LOVE. He continued to perform marriages between young soldiers and their “loves” before they would go to war, although he knew that this meant he was defying Claudius. In 269 A.C. he was eventually discovered by Claudius and was thrown into prison to be sentenced to death. While Valentine was waiting for his execution, he fell in love with the blind daughter of the prison guard. The night before his death, he wrote her a sonnet (form of poetry) in ink that he squeezed from violets. According to the legends, his words caused the blind girl to be able to

see again. It was a short romance because Valentine was beaten to death with clubs on the next day.

Valentine gave his life for love that leads to the sacred covenant between man and woman. He died, but his message lives on.

Valentine's Day is celebrated on February 14 because our ancestors believed that on this day the birds began to pair.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

Every group decides individually if they want to celebrate **Valentine's Day** or not. For us, it is a **"I love you very much"-Day**.

In practice, we talk with the children about people that God has blessed us with, who we love very much. Why do we love them so much? How do you feel when you spend time with that person? Then, we write some "I love you very much"-letters and draw or do some handicrafts for that person.

3. Carnival

The origin of Carnival is not entirely clear. Some people believe that the masks and the whole hustle and bustle of Carnival were meant to chase winter away. Many also believe that it is a custom of ancient pagan origin that had been in practice for thousands of years before the people became Christians and was then simply absorbed by the Christian culture.

Christians celebrate Carnival at the beginning of a long period of fasting (until Easter). Before this fasting period starts, some people want to romp and party together one more time. There is no proof that Carnival really goes back to an ancient pagan tradition. Recent research on traditions and customs rather finds that there are no texts or images from this time that provide information about the custom of "chasing winter away". The first written sources about Carnival are from the Middle Ages. For example, the Carnival in Munich is first mentioned in a manuscript from 1295, when the people were already Christians. Therefore, there is only one thing that is for sure: People have been celebrating Carnival to romp and party together one more time before the start of the long fasting period. And the masks were probably used to scare others rather than to chase winter away.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

For us, **Carnival** is a joyous celebration. God wants us to rejoice, laugh and have fun with each other.

In practice, we dress up and paint our faces and have a lot of fun. The children love to slip into different roles. We play fun games and dance and of course we eat the traditional “Krapfen” (donuts).

4. Easter

How we perceive and celebrate this time at our Kindergarten:

At **Easter** we talk about Jesus' death at the cross and about his resurrection. Other main aspects are, for example, how Jesus asked his father to forgive the people; where is Jesus now? – in heaven; until he comes back; etc.

The **focus** is set on his **resurrection**, the **fulfillment of the related promises** and what this means for us. God has done EVERYTHING possible so that we can have an eternal relationship/friendship with the king of kings, the creator of this earth, our father etc. The question now is: Do I want this? God reaches out his hand... Do I want to take it or do I turn my back on him? He has left it to me, because he loves me so much.

In practice, we sing songs such as "Jesus liebt die Kinder" (Jesus loves all children); "Jesus kam für mich" (Jesus came for me); "Hallelu, hallelu,..." etc., we speak about the story, watch a video in which someone reads the story of Easter out of a book while pictures from the book are shown (the crucifixion is only mentioned briefly). We rejoice that Jesus is alive and that he has prepared a house in heaven for all those who love him. We also speak about Jesus' promise to come back.

5. Pentecost

At Pentecost, people celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, as foretold by Jesus, and the conclusion of the Easter period. Pentecost is not the beginning of something completely new, but the continuation of the Easter celebration. Jesus' disciples gathered fifty days after Easter and received the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is something like a guarantee that the resurrection of Jesus at Easter and the related promises are still valid. Pentecost is also seen as the birthday of the Christian church.

The biblical events before Pentecost

The biblical story about Pentecost as found in Acts (Chapter 2, Verses 1-41) is said to be the formation report of the first Christian church and therefore of the origin of our church today. The author of Acts, Luke, writes about the apostles and disciples gathering at the Jewish Shavuot in Jerusalem. Suddenly, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and the disciples saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that came to rest on each of them: They had been filled with the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to speak in other tongues.

There were many Jews who had come from every country of the world to celebrate Shavuot. They gathered together and were confused because each one heard the apostles speak in their own language. Some recognized this as a miracle from God, but others thought that the disciples were drunk. But Peter, filled with the Spirit, raised his voice and proclaimed Jesus as Messiah, before he invited the audience to change their lives and get baptized. About 3.000 people followed his invitation and the first Christian church was founded on that day.

How we perceive and celebrate this time at our Kindergarten:

On the one hand, Pentecost is the festive conclusion of the Easter period; on the other hand, we remember the descent of the Holy Spirit who was sent to us as a helper and intercessor.

The story of the Pentecost celebration and the subject of the Holy Spirit are not easy to understand for young children.

We do not want to overwhelm the children, but rather want to teach them biblical truth in a way that is appropriate to their age. Therefore, we only speak about Pentecost in some kindergarten groups, if it appears to be appropriate to their age and to the group setting.

6. Harvest Festival

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

At the Harvest Festival, we thank God for taking such good care of us, especially concerning our food/harvest. Everything comes from him. Thank you God!

In practice, we serve fruits and vegetables on a table. Then, we talk about where everything comes from and how great it is that God created so many different fruits and vegetables. (We might also talk about our tongue and our nose that enable us to taste and smell.) We sing songs such as “Ja, hast du heute schon danke gesagt” (Have you already said ‘thank you’ today) and we include the different fruits and vegetables in our song. We pray to God and thank him for everything. Then, we try everything!

7. Thanksgiving

The US-American holiday “Thanksgiving“ goes back to the year 1607. The first big Thanksgiving Feast was celebrated on December 13 of 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It started with a thanksgiving prayer, thanking God for the good harvest. It took 3 days and all citizens were happy to participate.

On July 20 of 1676, Thanksgiving was first celebrated officially in the city of Charlestown, Massachusetts.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

At Thanksgiving, we thank God for taking such good care of us, especially concerning our food/harvest. Everything comes from him. Thank God!

In practice, this holiday is mostly only celebrated in our English group. They usually have the legendary Thanksgiving meal – turkey – and the parents are invited. The children thank their parents for a particular thing and sing songs. Sometimes, they also play a drama about the first encounter of the Native Americans with the settlers.

8. Mother’s Day

Some historical facts about Mother’s Day:

King Henry the 3rd (1216-1272) introduced the so-called “Mothering Sunday“ in England as a day to thank the “Mother Church“. Already back then; people also thanked their own mothers on this day. This practice was resumed in the 17th century. But Anna Jarvis is the one known as the “inventor“ of the mother’s day we celebrate today. Her mother was a great support to her, which is why she wrote letters and did not miss any opportunity to present her request – the introduction of a special day to honor all mothers. Anna visited a church in Philadelphia, where the board members supported her idea. Mother’s Day was set on the 2nd Sunday of every May and a Mother’s Day Committee was elected with the mission to establish the Mother’s Day throughout the world. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson officially proclaimed the 2nd Sunday of every May as Mother’s Day (“to publicly express our love and reverence for the mothers of our country“ and to emphasize the women’s role in the family). At this time, a Mother’s Day Movement also emerged in England

– especially promoted by the Salvation Army – and soon also spread to continental Europe. In 1922/23, Mother's Day was introduced in Germany.

How we perceive and celebrate this day at our Kindergarten:

We see ourselves as an institution that supports the family. When we celebrate Mother's Day, we thank the mothers of our children and want to encourage and invite them to spend time with each other and with us. We also provide an opportunity for the children to express their gratitude and love to their mothers, e.g. through self-made gifts, songs and poems.

In practice, we invite the mothers, spoil them with some iced coffee, cake etc., sing to them and bring them gifts. Sometimes, we organize a whole "family week" and celebrate a different family member every day, this way we also involve the grandparents, uncles and aunts and, of course, the fathers. We want the families to be able to spend a special time with their children, depending on their situation (example: Children growing up without a father can celebrate with another reference person/guardian).

Note: We do not celebrate Father's Day at the moment, because there are many children who do not live in the same household with their father.