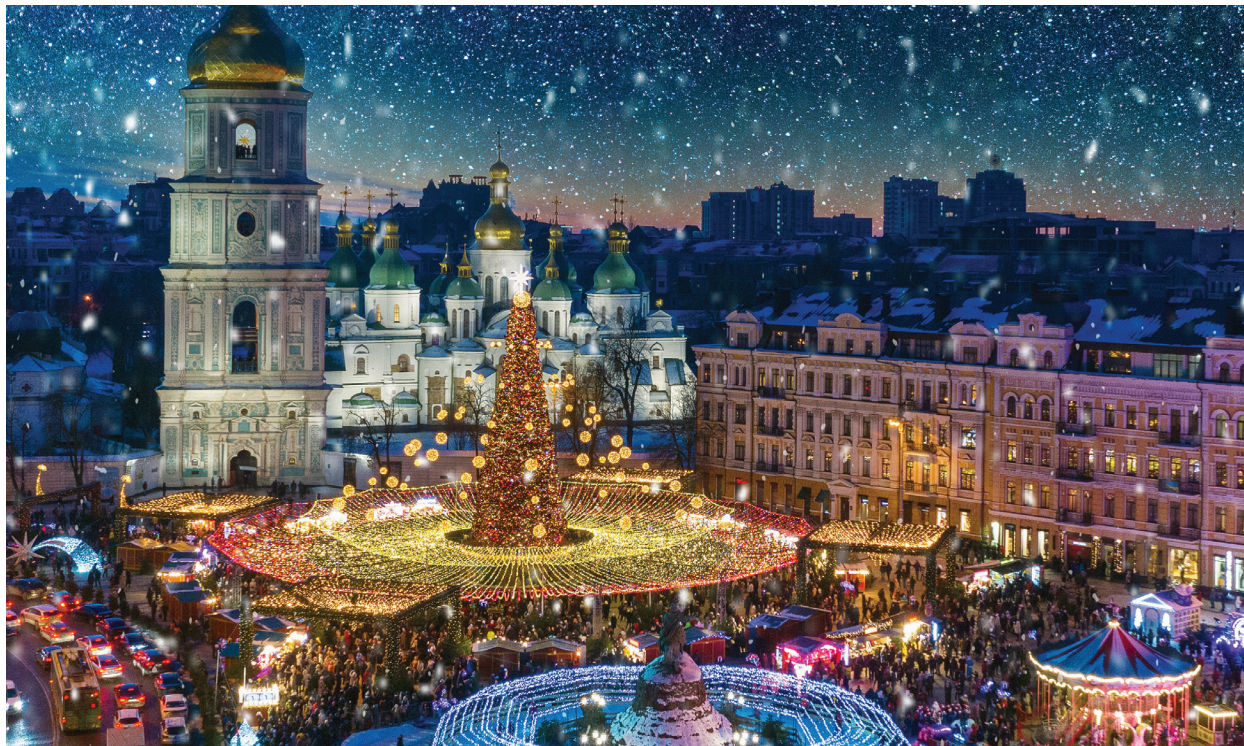




Resources for Worship, Education & Action



## An invitation to stand in solidarity with Ukraine

In this resource, we focus on Christmas, one of the most beloved and spiritual seasons in Ukraine, and our spotlight is on education. Included is a sampling of beautiful traditions about Christmas Eve (Holy Eve or Sviata Vecheria), the compelling spiritual symbolism imbued in a memorable family meal, a Ukrainian Christmas folk song that has made its way into our lexicon, and more. Expressing solidarity with Ukraine invites us to appreciate the integration of faith and culture as it is expressed in that context. As Presbyterian peacemakers, we celebrate the unique and compelling witness of the ancient Ukrainian church, a living witness to Christ since 988 A.D.

Our goal is always to be respectful and curious guests in spaces that are not our own. We believe that expanding our understanding can deepen ties across cultures even when it challenges us. Western protestant traditions, informed by practical and more iconoclastic views of spiritual practice, may limit our experiences of faith where mystery is more expansive than we know it. Language around expressions of gender roles may be different from our own. Because of these factors, common Ukrainian observances of Christmas may feel dissimilar, although contexts are informed by similar gender and status issues. Hierarchical family systems based in the “old ways” are the norm, whereas modern Ukrainians practice these traditions with more fluidity, and some reject them. May you find new meaning in your own traditions and may your curiosity deepen your own spiritual practice in solidarity with our Ukrainian siblings. Our prayer is that even in the most terrible of seasons, a sowing of peace will continue to yield the fruit of deep community, strong families and resilient faith.



# Christmas in Ukraine



*"The Night before Christmas." Support Ukrainian American Artist Olena Diadenko's Etsy shop. Part of the proceeds go to support Ukraine.*

For Ukrainians, Christmas is a much-loved season. Ukraine's Christmas traditions are informed by eastern Christian traditions, including Orthodox, Catholic and the Ukrainian Reformed Church. For generations, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day have been celebrated on Jan. 6 and 7, corresponding with the Russian Orthodox calendar. In 2022, however, as the war between Russia and Ukraine raged, the date was changed to align with the Gregorian calendar date of Dec. 25. This was a clear statement that Ukraine no longer looked to Russia in this matter. In honor of the diversity of Christian constituents, both Dec. 25 and Jan. 7 are official state holidays.

In mid-December, Christmas begins to fill Ukrainian cities with markets and festivals, decorations and lights. Artists sell painted wooden spoons, embroidered shirts, and delicious pastries and other traditional foods. The colorful, floral paintings of Petrykivka, recognized by UNESCO, adorn many artists' offerings. There are often concerts and plays that celebrate the nativity.



St. Nicholas Day, December 6, is celebrated by families across the country. St. Nicholas arrives at local churches, sometimes accompanied by angels! He is dressed as a Byzantine bishop to help people understand that St. Nicholas was a holy man and arrived long before Santa Claus came on the scene. He may even quiz the children on their catechism before giving a gift. It is also a time for local churches and communities to give gifts to those who have fewer resources. Christmas Day is reserved for family. Advent is observed by fasting from meat, sweets, cheese and other dairy products, much like Lent in eastern and western traditions.



The season of Christmas begins on Christmas Eve (Holy Eve or Sviata Vecheria). It marks the official start of Christmas. Preparations for this family meal begin earlier in the week, in anticipation of a joyful family meal together. The day of Holy Eve is usually dedicated to meal preparation. The meal centers on 12 dishes in honor of the 12 apostles. Every part of Holy Eve honors family, culture and traditional foods. The dishes are simple, intended to support the body's transition back to a full diet.

Formal dinner activities start with the appearance of the first star in the night sky, symbolizing the star the Magi followed to find the baby Jesus.



## Ukrainian Holy Eve beliefs and traditions



The center of Christmas in Ukraine is Holy Eve. Many traditions are included in this important day of the church calendar. The following are several important values and practices.

- **The meal begins early in the day** when the cook of the home strikes the day's fire with flint and steel that has sat under icons and images of the saints the 12 previous days. Twelve logs are dried throughout the 12 prior days. The day is begun in honor of the 12 apostles and concludes in a meal that also honors them.
- **Family is at the center** of religious and cultural celebration of Holy Eve. Gathering for a family Christmas meal is an important way to honor the strength of family ties throughout the year. There are some older generations who believe that anyone who spends Christmas Eve outside their family will feel lonely throughout the coming year. At the same time, however, immigrants and foreigners are invited into family circles with enthusiasm and appreciation. Guests on Christmas Eve are believed to bring happiness to the home and family.
- **Self-reflection** is an important spiritual practice in preparing for the sacred meal together. People are encouraged to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged them. This may help families stay connected and strengthen relationships for the coming year. It is believed that forgiveness creates a new year of happiness and well-being and avoids a year of difficulty.
- **Children are central to the Holy Night remembrance.** In some homes, a child under the age of 7 puts three loaves of bread, a pinch of salt and a wax candle on the didukh straw. The straw decoration of the didukh, a sweet grain pudding called kutia, and a traditional dried fruit drink called uzvar are placed nearby. The children must wait for the first star to appear in the night sky before they can eat. After this occurs, an adult, usually the "head of the household" or hospodor, enters the home and announces that Christmas has begun.
- **Ancestors are welcomed into the Christmas Eve dinner.** Before sitting at the table for dinner, someone may blow on a chair reserved for a loved one who has passed. After dinner, the family may leave uzvar on the windowsill for the dead. Uzvar is a drink made up of cooked dried fruits and berries and sometimes cinnamon, star anise and/or nutmeg. This drink is also a part of the evening meal.
- **The harvest is honored through didukhs, the symbol of the harvest.** The didukh is found in nearly every home and is a central symbol in the family Christmas celebration. A didukh is a decoration made



of rye, wheat or oatmeal sheaf. It represents the presence of the family's ancestors. At dark, an adult in the home creates a symbol of the harvest, or *didukh*, and puts it in a place of honor. In homes where roles are more pronounced, some participate in ancient traditions.

"Passing through the threshold of the home, (the master of the house) welcomes his mistress as if they see each other the first time this day. He greets ... wishing hundred years of happiness and health to all present at home. Then the master of the house puts 'didukh' under the images of saints, and the (mistress) covers the table with a new white cloth." For more information, [click here](#).

- After a long meal and a good night sleep, the Christmas morning greeting of "Christ is born!" and the answer, "Glorify Him!" rings through the home. On this day, people go to church for Christmas worship and prayers and often return to the family for more festivities.



## Symbolism and the Holy Eve Meal

Food connects us to our cultures, to each other, and in this meal, to God. The Holy Eve meal consists of 12 dishes, representing the 12 apostles. These dishes are usually made from simple, mostly vegetarian ingredients, as many are breaking their Advent fast. Each family has their own recipes, but a few dishes are consistent across generations.



This shared meal is rich in symbolism and can be experienced as sacred to those Christians and others. Some sources suggest other pagan and spiritual symbolism. The following meal components and their interpretations are adapted and used with permission as one way to deepen understanding and respect for the experience of Christmas for Ukrainians. There are many others that are not included here.



The most important cultural dish of the evening is kutia, which is boiled wheat with poppy seeds and honey. Often other fruits and nuts are added. Kutia is the first of 12 dishes served and there are many traditions and mythologies connected to the dish.

One old tradition that is still practiced in some homes lies in the hands of the person acting as the “head” of the family. The person in this role takes the first spoon of the kutia, raises it up and calls out the names of beloved family members who are no longer present in the flesh, inviting them to join the family meal on this sacred night. After the head of the family tastes the kutia, they throw the rest of the spoonful up to the ceiling. The number of kernels that stick to the ceiling foreshadows the number of swarms of bees and newborn cattle in the coming year. Additionally, the number of poppy seeds corresponds with how many eggs each hen will lay in the coming years. Afterward, the rest of the family is allowed to taste one or two spoonful of kutia. Then, the remaining dishes for the meal are brought out. Children participate by bringing a dish of kuta to their godparents and other relatives.

**The 12 dishes for the meal may include:**

- *Kapusiniak*, sour cabbage soup, which is enjoyed for its simplicity and is symbolic of unity around a solid foundation.
- Peas, which are a symbol of spring and the promise of resurrection.
- *Borsch*, or *borscht*, a beautiful beet-based soup, which is enjoyed on Christmas Eve. According to some, it encourages a celebration of goodness. Additionally, its vibrant color is connected to the biblical story of Herod's killing of many children in his attempt to kill Jesus.
- Cabbage rolls, or *holubtsi*, first appeared in the 18th century and are often a part of a Christmas Eve dinner. They symbolize peace and harmony, taken from the root word *holub*. A vegetarian version of cabbage rolls is consumed on Holy Eve and with meat on Christmas Day.
- Fish is a more digestible protein source and sometimes included in the Christmas Eve dinner. It represents the importance of fish in biblical texts and its use as an early Christian symbol. Pickled fishes, like herring, and other similar foods can be eaten on Christmas Eve; some in congealed form, such as Jell-O.
- *Uzvar*, the traditional drink made from dried fruit, represents the life given to each person. Pears, plums, apples, honey and sometimes lemon create this deliciously sweet drink.
- *Pampushky*, a garlic bread often rolled and cooked in cast iron, is also a favorite. It symbolizes the saints who have eternal life.



For more Ukrainian recipes and more ideas, follow [this link](#).

## Music and Dramatic Traditions

Christmas caroling occurs throughout the Christmas season. As part of the Slavic hospitality tradition, young carolers go to people's homes and sing songs. The hospodar, or master of the home, is expected to greet and welcome the children and feed them bread and salt and sometimes mead or mulled wine. In exchange, the children warm the home with Christmas songs. This tradition continues until Epiphany on Jan. 6.

### A beloved Ukrainian Christmas song

The most well-known Ukrainian Christmas carol is Shchedryk, or The Carol of the Bells, by Mykola Leontovych. The enchanting melody was not written as a Christmas song but is based on an old folk tune with a swallow as the purveyor of a different type of Good News. The popularized lyrics in the west were penned in 1938 by Peter Wilhousky and this shift solidified its place in the lexicon of Christmas carols. It is interesting to compare the lyrics.

*The Carol of the Bells*, lyrics by Peter Wilhousky

Hark! how the bells, sweet silver bells  
All seem to say, "throw cares away!"  
Christmas is here bringing good cheer  
To young and old, meek and the bold  
Ding, dong, ding, dong; that is their song  
With joyful ring, all caroling  
One seems to hear words of good cheer  
From ev'rywhere, filling the air  
Oh how they pound raising the sound  
O'er hill and dale; telling their tale ...  
Gaily they ring while people sing  
songs of good cheer; Christmas is here  
Merry, Merry, Merry, Merry Christmas  
Merry, Merry, Merry, Merry Christmas  
On on they send, on without end their joyful tone  
To young and old; meek and the bold  
Oh how they pound, raising their sound  
O'er hill and dale telling their tale ...



In the westernized version, the lilting music and cheerful lyrics reflect the sound of bells ringing.

In contrast, the original folk lyrics tell the story of a swallow, the first bird of spring, who flies into a home and summons the "master of the house" with a beautiful song. These lyrics bring good cheer as the swallow announces the good news that spring is sure to come and that all will be well. A rough translation is below.



*Shchedryk*, lyrics by Mykola Leontovych

A little swallow flew (into the household)  
 And started to twitter  
 To summon the master  
 "Come out, come out, O master  
 Look at the sheep pen  
 There the ewes are nestling  
 And the lambkin have been born  
 Your goods (livestock) are great  
 You will have a lot of money  
 Your goods (livestock) are great  
 You will have a lot of money, (by selling them)  
 If not money, then chaff: (from all the grain you will harvest)  
 You have a dark-eyebrowed (beautiful) wife"  
 Shchedryk, shchedryk, a shchedrivka  
 A little swallow flew  
 A little swallow flew

[Listen here](#) to a recording of the original lyrics in English.

### Vertep performances

Ukraine also has a long history of what is known as vertep performances, which are plays performed by children. Vertep is a portable puppet theater and drama that presents the nativity scene and other biblically minded plays. These living tableaux were common in worship services as early as the 5th century. Some vertep are traditional, but new plays are also written each year. The Christmas star is always a part of the play, symbolizing the birth of Christ.



## Summary

Throughout the Christmas season, family meals rich with symbolism, traditional foods, music, drama and other activities are shared to honor the birth of Jesus, the lives of the saints, and the biblical narrative. As we work to heed the biblical call to be sowers of peace in Ukraine, let us embrace their unique and meaningful expressions of faith and culture and keep them close to our hearts.

