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December 25

***For unto us a child is born,
Unto us a son is given.***

Isaiah 9:6

Of the many traditions, the artwork, the music, and the food that has become part of the season, our minds' image of the Christ Child in the manger is what brings the reality of Christmas to life. With that child in the manger, we can look into the face of God: the God of mystery, the God of grace, the God of eternal love. It is that love that does not let us go, then, centuries ago in Bethlehem, and now, in our times and in our homes.

The Gestapo in April 1943 arrested and imprisoned German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a leading Christian voice against Nazism during World War II. Writing from his prison cell and then from a concentration camp, Bonhoeffer spoke of the mystery of God in the midst of evil, death, guilt, and distress. He described the blessed certainty of salvation through the birth of a divine child and the miracle of unexpected love. Bonhoeffer wrote:

God travels wonderful ways with human beings, but he does not comply with the views and opinions of people. God does not go the way that people want to prescribe for him; rather, his way is beyond all comprehension, free and self-determined beyond all proof. Where reason is indignant, where our nature rebels, where our piety anxiously keeps us away: that is precisely where God loves to be. There he confounds the reason of the reasonable; there he aggravates our nature, our piety—that is where he wants to be, and no one can keep him from it. Only the humble believe him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly....God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human



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*beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.**

Bonhoeffer moves with us through the Advent days of Luke's gospel, down that long road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Then, Bonhoeffer brings us face to face with God in the dark closeness of a humble stable.

At the end of her long trip, weary, Mary "gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Bonhoeffer said it wonderfully:

God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.*

Now we have come, once again, to Christmas. We invite you to come with us by television, computer, smart phone, or at least by imagination, to Bethlehem and Manger Square. It is dark. On one side of the square rises a Moslem minaret, on the opposite side is the Church of the Nativity. And in the square gather people from many places, of different colors and genders, but brothers and sisters all. They lift candles and sing, softly, the same words in many languages: "Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light...with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus Lord at thy Birth...Christ the Savior is Born!"

* See Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2010.

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***Hallelujah! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
The kingdoms of this world is become the
kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ: and He
shall reign for ever and ever.
King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.***

(Georg Friedrich Händel, Messiah)



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...and He shall reign for ever and ever. King of Kings, and Lord of Lords

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In the Kitchen, December 25

Christmas Salad

Cranberry Salad

Honey Wheat Rolls

Ham

Cinnamon Apples

Coconut-Pecan Sweet Potato Bake

Peas with Onions

Green Bean Casserole

Christmas Date Cake with Eggnog or Vanilla Ice Cream



This menu is for a traditional Christmas dinner—nothing too froufrou, expensive, or complicated, and something similar to what you may have had way back when and once upon a time. The Christmas salad celebrates the tastes of the season with dried cranberries, apples, and pears and has a bit of crumbled blue cheese for a creamy, savory bite. Because it's Christmas, and tradition is more important than food fashion, a cranberry-jello salad is on the menu. In addition to cranberries, the not-too-sweet jello salad includes pineapple, chopped apple, clementines, and yogurt. The fresh, puffy yeast rolls are a treat. They also are easy. Nonetheless, if you are short on time, you may use my super-secret recipe. To accompany the centerpiece ham are spicy-sweet cinnamon apples. A sweet potato bake is topped with crunchy pecans and actually tastes like sweet potatoes instead of just sugar. To add green to the menu and something less complicated, try peas with onions. They steam quickly in the microwave and offset some of the richness of the rest of the meal. Also on the menu is green bean casserole. It's slightly slimmed down, but the casserole relies on the traditional recipe with mushroom soup (yes!) and French fried onions on top. Enjoy it! And for dessert, the menu includes an old recipe for date cake with healthy updates. The cake tastes of Christmases past and includes chocolate chips, pecans, and maraschino cherries. Serve the cake plain or with eggnog or vanilla ice cream.

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Christmas Salad – Serves 4-6+

This is a family favorite and is full of seasonal fruits. If you want to use all apples or all pears, feel free. The salad is good either way. You also can substitute toasted pecans for the almonds.

10-12 ounces of mixed baby greens and/or spinach

¼ cup of dried cranberries

¼ cup of sliced almonds

¼ cup of chopped green onions

1 medium red apple, cored and chopped

1 medium ripe pear, cored and chopped

2 tablespoons of orange juice

¼ cup of crumbled blue (or gorgonzola) cheese

Dressing

3 tablespoons of olive oil

¼ cup of wine or cider vinegar

2 tablespoons of sugar or 2 tablespoons of raspberry preserves

1 teaspoon of Dijon mustard



Whisk all the dressing ingredients until smooth. In a large salad bowl toss the chopped apple and pear with the orange juice so that all the pieces are coated. Add the greens, dried cranberries, almonds, onions, and blue cheese. You may refrigerate the salad until serving time. When ready to serve the salad, whisk the dressing again and add it to the salad. Toss everything gently before serving the salad.



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Cranberry Salad – Serves 8+

Some salads come in and out of fashion, and congealed salads now seem to be passé. Nonetheless, this one—probably similar to one your grandmother served—seems to disappear quickly at holiday dinners whether the salad is fashionable or not. I have lightened it somewhat to reduce the calories and sugar, and it's quite good. The salad also is a refreshing contrast to some of the traditional rich fare served at holiday gatherings. You can serve it in squares on top of lettuce, from a large glass bowl, or you can divide it among fancy wine or dessert glasses. Any way you choose, the salad looks pretty and festive.

2 packages of sugar-free cranberry gelatin (4-serving size)

2 cups of boiling water

1 cup of chopped cranberries

1 cup of crushed pineapple (juice reserved)

1 small apple, cored and chopped

2 clementines, peeled, and sections divided and chopped into ½ inch pieces

1 cup of cool liquid (including reserved pineapple juice and water to make up the remaining liquid, if necessary)

1 cup of fat-free, sugar-free vanilla yogurt

½ cup of chopped toasted pecans (optional)

Pour the boiling water over the gelatin and stir until the gelatin dissolves. Pour one cup of the gelatin into a separate bowl and set it aside. To the remaining gelatin, add the cranberries, pineapple, apple, clementines, and ½ cup of juice (if you don't have enough juice, add enough cold water to equal ½ cup). Stir the mixture well and refrigerate it. Meanwhile, whisk the yogurt into the remaining cup of gelatin until it's smooth. Set it aside. Stir the cooling cranberry gelatin mixture periodically until it is partially set. Pour it into a large oblong casserole dish, bowl, or dessert cups. Gently pour the cooled, thickened yogurt mixture on top. Refrigerate the jello mixture until it's almost firm and

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sprinkle it with the nuts, if you're using them. Return the congealed mixture to the refrigerator until serving time. If you prepare the congealed mixture in an oblong casserole, you can cut it into squares and serve the squares on top of lettuce or other greens, if you'd like.





Honey Wheat Rolls or Bread – Makes 12 Rolls or 1 Loaf

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This bread is an exception. I write this because I generally don't make yeast bread much. I think it takes too long, makes a mess, and, for me, is easier to buy (see the note at the end of the recipe). Nonetheless, this recipe turns out nutritious rolls or a loaf of bread quickly and with little fuss. The dough actually is fun to make. The rolls and bread are even better to eat, preferably with a little butter, jam, or even peanut butter. Try the recipe and see what you think. Admittedly, you won't have an "artisanal" bread (or 38 pages of directions to make the "artisanal" loaf). What you will have are warm, moist, honey-infused wheat rolls (or bread) that are nice and soft and squishy and perfect for breakfast and dinner. These are the sort of rolls and bread our grandmothers made—simple and perfect for just plain eating. If you really feel inspired, you also can use the dough to make sweet rolls for breakfast.

1 cup of hot water (zap cool water in the microwave for about a minute)

1 cup of white flour

2 tablespoons of honey

1 tablespoon or packet of active dry yeast

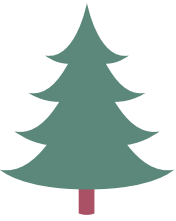
1 teaspoon of sugar

½-1 teaspoon of salt

1 tablespoon of canola oil

2 cups of white whole-wheat flour

Coat a baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray. In a mixing bowl, whisk 1 cup of white flour into the hot water. Whisk in the honey. Add the yeast, sugar, ½ teaspoon of salt, and oil and whisk everything together to dissolve the yeast. Let the mixture sit for about 30 minutes until bubbly and spongy. Add most of the white whole-wheat flour and the remainder of the salt (if you'd like saltier bread) to the mixture and stir it with a wooden spoon. When the dough becomes too thick to stir, knead it by hand for 5-10



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minutes, adding enough of the remaining flour to prevent the dough from sticking to your hands. I knead the dough in the bowl (because I don't want to have to clean the countertop when I'm finished), but you can also do it on a floured countertop.

For Rolls

Pull off little walnut shaped pieces of dough, roll them into balls between your palms, and place the balls on the baking sheet. Coat the rolls with nonstick cooking spray and cover them with plastic wrap. Let the rolls rise for at least 30 minutes or until about doubled. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees (while the rolls are rising) and bake the rolls for 15 to 20 minutes until golden brown.

For Bread

Pat the dough into a round and put it on the baking sheet. Cut an X across the top about ¼ inch deep and 2 inches long. Coat the bread with nonstick cooking spray and cover it with plastic wrap. Let the bread rise for 30-60 minutes or until doubled. Bake the loaf for 20-30 minutes or until golden brown.

For Sweet Rolls

Pat the dough into a rectangle about ¼ - ½ inch thick. Stopping about ½ inch from each edge, spread melted butter over the top of the dough (about ¼ cup), sprinkle cinnamon sugar over the butter (2 tablespoons of sugar, 2 tablespoons of dark brown sugar, and 1 teaspoon of cinnamon, mixed together), and sprinkle chopped nuts and/or raisins over the cinnamon sugar (1/2 cup each). Starting at one of the long ends of the dough rectangle, roll the dough up into a cylinder. Cut it into 1-inch slices and place them on a baking sheet coated with non-stick cooking spray or covered with parchment paper.

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Coat the sweet rolls with nonstick cooking spray and cover them with plastic wrap. Let the sweet rolls rise for at least 30 minutes or until about doubled. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees (while the sweet rolls are rising) and bake the sweet rolls for 15 to 20 minutes until golden brown. Dust the tops of the sweet rolls with powdered sugar or drizzle them with orange glaze (1 cup of confectioner's sugar and 1-2 tablespoons of orange juice, mixed until smooth).

Note: *Are you really short on time? You can try the not-so-secret recipe above, but if you are really feeling pressed, you might want to make my "Super Secret Rolls" instead. My secret recipe is to buy a package of frozen roll dough and follow the directions on the package for plain rolls—put them on a baking sheet, spray them with nonstick cooking spray, let them rise, and then bake them. The rolls are fluffy white pillows, fast, and easy. And I hide the packaging in the trash.*

