

# The Artist's Almanac

## December 2009

**In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.**

**Christina Rosseti**

Now comes sullen December, with leaden skies and cold swirling rain, as the sun nears its nadir. Hunter, the cat, stays close to his warm garage room and fleece bed.

This follows sharply on the heels of the warmest November for a century, an extended Indian Summer, with first frost not 'til the 29<sup>th</sup>, and leaves no doubt as to what winter holds in store for us. The landscape wears a weather-beaten face and night falls in mid afternoon. Why, then, such merriment?

December is the hinge of the year, when the sun begins its return to us. All whom we meet this month are talking of going home – home, where every sacred custom is revived and cherished, recalling seasons long past. Holly wreathes doorways and candles shine from windows. Carols season the air and in cold city streets the barest acquaintances exchange smiles and greetings. We are moved now by generosity for the homeless and humble among whom our Lord was born.



The Adoration of the Shepherds - Rembrandt

At Christmas, each grandchild begs for their own favorite dish or dessert, be it sage dressing with giblet gravy, candied sweet potatoes, banana pudding, pecan pie, coconut cake or boiled custard, while the older of us prefer country ham, ambrosia or fruitcake. Granddad insists on a Kentucky breakfast of hominy, sausage and hot buttered biscuits with blackberry jam, washed down with strong coffee. The fire dances on the hearth.

Custom and ceremony carry us through this season. The tree is chosen and brought into the house, filling it with fragrance. Candles and decorations fill the mantles as joyful music of heavenly choirs illumines common reality, suffusing it with joy. We listen to Handel's Messiah and at chill midnight on the 24th go to the Mass of Christ.

We remember Christmases past, when those who loved us realized all our hopes and we hope that today's children will have the same memories. Why is tradition so important to our holiday season?

Tradition enacts our most cherished beliefs that assure us we are loved and meant to love others. When the Creator of the stars of night bent down to touch a Hebrew maiden, representative of all mankind, all creation held its breath. Then we were saved by her quiet *Yes*.



Alba Madonna by Raphael  
National Gallery of Art