

“Soul and Solstice”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on December 21st, 2008

As the poet has written:

*Shadows are fleeing
Light is returning
Warmth will come again
Green will come again
Life will continue.*

It reminds me of the song:

*Little darling, its been a long cold lonely winter
Little darling, it seems like years since it's been here...*

The word *solstice* comes from the Latin for *sun* (sol) and for *standing still* (sistere.) The solstice is literally when the sun stands still. Well, that isn't exactly what happens, but I can see how the ancients might have seen it that way. Everyone has experienced those moments where it seems as though time is standing still. We all have moments in our lives that stay with us forever: moments that shape us, that are frozen in time. Moments whose sights and sounds and smells shape our souls and give meaning to our lives because we bring them with us into our present.

For many of you it may have been the birth of a child, like I described last week. For others maybe it was the death of a loved one, or an accident, or an incredible opportunity. Maybe it was a choice. Maybe it was something that happened *to* you. These are the moments that grab hold of our attention so tightly with their significance, that we understand from that moment forward, nothing will be the same. Nothing will feel the same.

For some people in Ireland, one of those moments was the winter solstice which took place this morning at 8:04 am. Winter solstice is also called *Midwinter* or *Yule*, and it occurs at the instant when the Sun's position in the sky is at its greatest angular distance on the other side of the equator from the observers' view. Depending on the calendar, the event of the winter solstice will occur some time between December 20th and December 23rd each year during the longest night of the year.

Though the winter solstice only lasts an instant, the term also refers to the full 24-hour period of the day on which it occurs. Today. THIS is one of the oldest known holidays in human history. Some anthropologists believe that solstice celebrations go back over 30 thousand years.

What is so significant about this single moment in time that cultures have been marking and mapping and celebrating it for so long?

Winter is the time when, throughout human history, people have feared the possibility that days might forever continue to get shorter, and nights forever longer, ending with the inevitable demise of life. Light and life so often go together, as do darkness and death. This late December period has been considered the most dangerous time of year. And for many without the means necessary to battle the cold and the darkness, the inactivity or the solitude, this is still true. For until quite recently, it is in winter when food and fuel might run out with no means left for survival, and when unpredictable weather might bring dreadful results.

I will never forget that moment of returning to Tulsa from Dallas on December 15th last year. Returning to that dark and frozen tree battleground graveyard, when here in Tulsa we were reminded of the threat of winter. It was last year's solstice when the lights and the heat were taken out by the ice storm and we were forced to combine resources, build fires and await the return of the light like our ancestors have done for centuries past.

Ancient peoples believed that because daylight was waning, it might go away forever, so they lit huge bonfires in order to tempt the sun to come back. The tradition of decorating our houses and our trees with lights at this time of year is passed down from those ancient bonfires. This time of year, we are all, to some extent, consciously or unconsciously, waiting for the return of the sun.

Let me be clear, today I mean the S-U-N. Although this is a delightful English accident isn't it? What if we could all hold our religious metaphors so lightly as to let the vowels change with such ease? Because for many, this time of year is the rebirth of the S-O-N (which in our state is much more socially acceptable.) But in some sense they are truly one and the same. Come Christmas there will be Peace on Earth and Goodwill to men with the rebirth of the Sun/Son(s).

So the idea of the birth of hope at this time of year of course is not new AND not necessarily Christian. Our Unitarian Christmas heritage includes authors of tradition you may not know. In other traditions, like ancient Egypt and Syria, people celebrated the winter solstice as the sun's birthday. In Ancient Rome, the winter solstice was celebrated with the festival of Saturnalia, during which all business transactions and even wars were suspended. To celebrate Saturnalia, slaves were even waited upon by their masters for the day. *The last shall be first and the first shall be last.* YES INDEED!

Jews have for centuries celebrated an eight-day festival of Hanukkah, or Festival of Lights.

Hanukkah recalls the war fought by the Macabees in the cause of religious freedom. Antiochus, the king of Syria, conquered Judea in the 2nd century BCE. And when he did, he terminated worship in the Temple and stole the sacred lamp, the menorah, from before the altar. At the time of the solstice, the King rededicated the Temple to a Pagan deity. Judah and the Macabees led a band of rebels, and succeed in retaking Jerusalem. They restored the temple and lit the menorah. Although they had found only sufficient consecrated oil to last for 24 hours, the flames burned steadily for eight days.

Today's menorahs have nine branches; the ninth branch is for the Shamash, or servant light, which is used to light the other eight candles. And when a person of the Jewish faith gazes at the light of the menorah, he or she gives thanks for the miracle in the Temple long ago when the light shown through the darkness beyond all reason.

I for one am ready for the sun to make a comeback (you all just fill in the vowel that makes you happy.) I am tired of the darkness; I mean really tired. So tired that I can not get up in the morning. Nine months out of the year I am up before my alarm even goes off – at 5 am – with no trouble. And then from November to January, I cannot seem to get enough sleep. I actually have what doctors have labeled Seasonal Affective Disorder. That's right, so doctors have diagnosed me as *S.A.D.* during the winter (like I didn't know.) So beginning in November, I connect a light to my alarm clock that turns on when it is time to get up. Like a modern day bonfire blazing in the darkness. Like a bright north star, the lamp points me through the darkness of my sleep to begin my day until the sun returns and the lamp is put away.

The darkness especially affects populations in the near polar regions. The depressive psychological effects of winter on individuals and societies are for the most part tied to coldness, tiredness, malaise, and inactivity. We are such children of the sun. The insufficient sunlight of the short winter days increases the secretion of melatonin in the human body, throwing off our circadian rhythm with longer sleep. Whether you have Seasonal Affective Disorder or not, I can tell you that our ancestors have been sad and scared of winter for thousands of years. They have gathered together and built fires and monuments, created art and told stories to help them through. To remind themselves **and their children** that this time of darkness does not last forever... that there is hope... That the sun will return. The light will return. Prosperity will return. And Solstice is the moment when things do begin to *turn* ever so slightly. It is the moment when we mark that time is not frozen permanently in the darkness.

This morning's solstice was likely one of those memorable moments of time standing still for some of the 100 people who were allowed to be inside the Newgrange Burial mound near Donore, Ireland. This is such a popular place to be at Winter Solstice that there is actually a

lottery to determine which 100 people they let in. Last year over 28,000 people put their names in the lottery to go.

Newgrange is a tomb believed to have been built over 5000 years ago. It is an acre diameter mound, surrounded in white quartz stone, with a single entrance facing east. The inside is carved all over with megalithic circles. You may have seen this famous symbol: three spiraling circles intertwined. The Newgrange burial mound is believed to have been actively used for about 1000 years and then buried by a natural disaster, only to be rediscovered about 300 years ago by a professor O'Kelly on an archeological dig. George Cunningham was among the few privileged people to witness winter solstice at Newgrange from inside the chamber a few years ago. He writes:

I will never forget my first sight of the Grand Canyon, or my first exposure to the giant Redwoods of California or when (my wife) and I hugged the oldest living trees in the world, the Bristlecone pines on top of White Mountain in the Sierra Nevadas; [I will never forget] my first sight of St Peter's in Rome. But the early morning of [that solstice] was something very special [to me].

From about 8.40 am, I was standing in [total] darkness with other privileged people in the cross-shaped chamber in the middle of the burial mound of Newgrange, while hundreds gathered outside. Clare, [the] manager of the Visitor Centre, unobtrusively filled in the historical background, but most of the time we stood in silence...

He continues:

The forecast was good: it [was to be] be a clear sunrise. But just how good, nobody could really have imagined. Murmurs from outside noise gradually increased, giving an even more heightened sense of expectation. And then at 8:58 a pencil beam of sunlight appeared on the [ancient] chamber floor. A ray of the rising sun, appearing above the hill [just] opposite, had traveled through the roof box [above the door], along the passage to appear on the floor, just as it had done at this moment in time over 5000 years ago [for nearly 1000 years].

Gradually the ray broadened to about a foot in width and then started to flood the passageway until the sun's golden rising filled the roofbox above the entrance. For some seventeen minutes we were dazzled and humbled by Stone Age man's ingenuity [by their hope, their precision, by the mark they have left and the story they told. [What was their world like?] Who stood here 5000 years ago? Still dazzled by the sun streaming in the roof box [illuminating the entire chamber] we exited to allow those waiting patiently outside to enter in their turn.

The Newgrange Burial Mound predates Stonehenge by nearly 1000 years. Stonehenge, as well as many of the most ancient stone structures made by human beings, are believed to have been designed to pinpoint the precise date and time of the solstice. People around the world with no elaborate instruments to detect the solstice were still able to notice a slight elevation of the sun's path within a few days after the solstice – perhaps by December 25th. And so many celebrations were often timed for about the 25th, on what has become Christmas Day.

Von Del Chamberlain, an astronomer, writes

“Slowly at first, then more rapidly as we go into January and February, days get longer and everything around helps us celebrate the increase of light.

It speaks well for the human spirit

that our greatest religious celebrations take place at winter solstice time,

as people strive to radiate warmth of fellowship and love on these dimmer days.

The festivals of darker days are really celebrations of light.

Shakespeare said, "Darkness has its uses."

It seems appropriate that our long winter nights shimmer with the brightest stars:

Orion, Canis Major, Gemini, Taurus, to name a few beautiful winter constellations.

The light they send at night to inspire our minds makes up for the loss of daylight.

When we see these brilliant winter stars, migrating farther [and farther] to the west each evening, we know with certainty

that once more light is on the rise,

for we have passed the point of lowest illumination

and are surely headed toward warmer days.”

So for the winter solstice,

The season when we celebrate the Birth of Jesus

the Earth is at the exact spot in its orbit

where the our axis tilts the farthest away from the sun

and then for the rest of the year inches ever closer.

But for centuries,

Pre-Christian people have been ushering in the return of the sun.

Decking the halls and singing about the return of the sun.

Today, winter holiday gatherings are still valued for emotional comfort, having something to look forward to at this darkest time of the year.

Midwinter festivals and celebrations occurring on the longest night of the year, often call for evergreens,

bright illumination,

large ongoing fires,

feasting, communion with close ones, and evening physical exertion by dancing and singing

All of these are examples of cultural winter therapies

that have evolved as traditions since the beginnings of civilization.

Such traditions of decking the halls

can stir the wit, stave off malaise, reset the internal clock and rekindle the human spirit.

The traditional Christmas Song

Deck the Halls is actually a wonderful testament to solstice

This song mentions most of the Solstice elements

The Celebration of music, gifts, singing, dancing, lights

And wreaths, trees and Holly all that stay green through winter.

The Yule log, another long-standing pre-Christian tradition, is also mentioned in Deck The Halls... and reminding us of the fires we must build at this time.

The Yule log has also been called....

Are you ready for this? I did not know this...

The **ashen faggot**

Because of course a faggot is a bundle of sticks...

is an old Anglo Saxxon tradition

and was carried on into Massachusetts to the new world

The tradition is that at The wassail party near the solstice

people drink wassail, a warm spiced punch,

And pass around a bundle of sticks, twigs or branches made of ash (the wood)

Now you see where they get —the other name

The sticks are bound with green ash willow stems

which is then placed onto the fire.

And as each of the willow bindings burst,

the watchers toast it with a drink.

Some traditions even had the unmarried women each choose a willow stem,
and the first one whose tie snapped was supposed to be married the next year.

The Yule Log...which is what we had better agree to call it so that no one gets in trouble...
has now been commemorated in a beautiful rolled cake by the French which is how we have a
buche de noel

Now Our version of this Wassail party here at All Souls
is that on Christmas Eve

We eat Cookies made by families in the congregation
and drink non-alcoholic Wassail in Emerson Hall – Olive Sonen’s recipe.
following the candlelight service while fires burn in the crèches outside.

So no matter our theology...

It is part of our human heritage to mark this moment in time...

To celebrate the rebirth of the sun... to remember Hope

And the persistence of the human spirit

Even in our darkest times.

Because

Shadows are fleeing

Light is returning

Life will continue

Amen.