

WINTER SOLSTICE

I have been thinking about doing a service focused on the Winter Solstice for a while now. Celebrations of the Winter Solstice have been practiced by Earth-Centered traditions in various places in the Northern Hemisphere since long before history was written down. We know a few things about such celebrations, but since the season was co-opted by Christians in the fourth century of that tradition, we know less about the actual celebrations than we might have. Christianity was not inclined to keep many records of religions or religious celebrations that it was trying to wipe out. Christianity's practice of love often did not extend to pagan religions or practices or indigenous peoples. The selection of Christianity as the Imperial religion by Constantine and the dominance of Western Christianity for nearly two Millennia has not always matched the religion of the humble itinerant teacher, Jesus.

Modern people in scientifically oriented societies know about how the earth orbits the Sun in approximately 365 and $\frac{1}{4}$ days, and also how the earth rotates on its axis in just about 24 hours, and even about how the angle of the earth's axis relative to the Sun changes so that the length of days change seasonally. The combination of these factors results in a shortening of days in the Northern Hemisphere until about December 21st even though the earth is closer to the Sun at this time of year. The angle of sunlight reaching the Northern Hemisphere results in shorter and generally colder days the further North you are, while the Southern Hemisphere enjoys its warmest longest days.

Back in olden times, people didn't know all that, though they eventually figured out that the Sun would return after the day we now call December 21st. This is the Solstice, and though it can vary by a day or so either way, the Sun would predictably return and be visible at a known position at Stonehenge and New Grange and other ancient religious sites. Solstice literally means Sun standing still, after which it reverses its position until it hits the Summer Solstice on about June 21st. And so it goes through the seasons.

At some point, people began to have festivals either to celebrate the return of the Sun, or to insure that the days would lengthen and Spring would eventually break the grip of the Winter season, or perhaps both. Some of these Solstice festivals were quite elaborate and involved several days of eating, dancing, and in the case of Saturnalia, wild sexual debauchery, in which a good time was had by all except at the end when the king of the party, who had been a prisoner before the celebration, was executed. It would have been quite natural for people seeing the shortening of days to imagine that the end was coming and to want to get in all the partying they could.

Many social scientists have surmised that one of the great purposes of religion has been to restrain our baser impulses with moral codes and laws that will protect the more vulnerable members of families and societies. Sacrificing the person through whose sins one could live vicariously, or throwing virgins into the volcano might keep the populace under control while satisfying the restless deities. Though modern people might see such things as barbaric, they had an important place in their societies. Those who were sacrificed for the good of the society would have had an honored place and would likely have been carefully prepared for such service. Our modern individualistic standards would have been foreign and perhaps immoral to many early peoples.

The Germanic celebration of Yule at the Solstice in the Nordic countries involved feasting and drinking Ale and celebrating Odin. There also were fertility aspects of the celebration and honoring of Odin's Winter Hunt in the sky. The Yule log and Yule singing come from the Yule celebrations.

Take a few minutes and imagine yourself back in ancient times, before science explained the cycles of the seasons with all that we now know about the Sun, Earth, orbits, rotation, etc. Back in the days when people thought the Sun was the great light placed in Earth's sky for the benefit of the people and animals, carried across the heavens in a great chariot. To many, the Sun was the most important Deity, married to and balanced by the Moon. What would it feel like when the Sun appeared more distant and shined only a few hours as the earth

cooled with the coming of Fall then Winter? Wouldn't you have worried about the Sun abandoning you until you could convince it to return? Wouldn't you have given great gifts to insure that the Sun would return? Would you sacrifice a child? If not that, would you bring offerings, perhaps sacrificing a goat or a sheep to appease the unhappy gods who had taken away the Sun? Would you have gathered your friends to build monument to the Sun when it returned?

Stonehenge and New Grange and other ancient temples were oriented to mark the first or last rays of the Sun at the solstice. Modern Druids and other Pagans come to Stonehenge each year to worship and celebrate the Solstices and the Equinoxes. These sites were built thousands of years ago, before any of the world's major religions took their modern shapes. What was it like to be on earth in those days? What fears and hopes dominated their dreams?

Archeologists and Anthropologists have discovered much about many ancient cultures, but they cannot fully reconstruct the lives of ancient people. What was it really like to live in those times and what were their festivals and celebrations like? We know so much more about the modern religions that have chronicled their teachings through the Vedas, the Bible, the Koran, and other writings. And even with the modern religions, we keep learning new things about their early practices.

What were the fears and the dreams of the people who built New Grange and Stonehenge? Who or what were they worshipping? What kind of rituals and sacrifices did they practice? What did they hope to accomplish with their ceremonies? We have so many questions and so few answers, which of course has led to lots of assumptions and theories!

Bonfires were often lit to keep beasts and demons away. In ancient times, we might have seen fires burning around every settlement, perhaps outside each home. In the darker seasons, people must surely have spent more time looking into the heavens, viewing stars and constellations and imagining all kinds of things about stars and planets and comets and meteors. Would any of those ancient peoples have imagined that the lights in the heavens were distant suns

and planets? Were people really satisfied with flat earth and curved heavens explanations for what they saw with gods opening up doors to let snow and rain come down? Future peoples may well wonder at our beliefs about how things work and who is in charge! In any case there is much that we do not and probably will not know about ancient peoples and what they must have thought about the changes of seasons and the apparent disappearance of the Sun.

As we think about the Winter Solstice today, we have little awareness of its impact on pre-historic peoples. We can only imagine what they must have seen and felt as the year wound to its close. We can, however, increase our awareness of the natural flow of the seasons and the impact of the relationship between the earth and the Sun. We now know that the source of the seasons changing is a natural occurrence related to the angle of the axis of the earth and the rotation of the earth as it orbits the Sun. As a scientifically oriented people, we also know that human industry can affect the natural processes of Earth. In celebrating the Winter Solstice, we remind ourselves of our connection to the Earth and the Sun, celebrating their role as sources of our lives.

The Winter Solstice is the shortest day for the Northern Hemisphere, the time when we are most attuned to the darkness of the year. Many of us have already had our furnaces on for several weeks and have been wearing coats and hats whenever we go out. This may not be snow country, but damp days can feel awfully chilly! The extra hours of darkness encourage reading and indoor activities and possibly encourage us to be in a more meditative or contemplative state of mind. In that spirit, I invite you to take a moment or two in meditation as I share two readings about the Solstice.

"The Solstice is a time of quietude, of firelight, and dreaming, when seeds germinate in the cold earth, and the cold notes of church bells mingle with the chimes of icicles. Rivers are stilled and the land lies waiting beneath a coverlet of snow. We watch the cold sunlight and the bright stars, maybe go for walks in the quiet land. . . . All around us the season seems to reach a standstill — a point of repose." --John Matthews

Winter's Cloak By Joyce Rupp

This year I do not want
the dark to leave me.
I need its wrap
of silent stillness,
its cloak
of long lasting embrace.
Too much light
has pulled me away
from the chamber
of gestation.

Let the dawns
come late,
let the sunsets
arrive early,
let the evenings
extend themselves
while I lean into
the abyss of my being.

Let me lie in the cave
of my soul,
for too much light
blinds me,
steals the source
of revelation.

Let me seek solace
in the empty places
of winter's passage,
those vast dark nights
that never fail to shelter me.

And now as we near the end of our time together today, I encourage you to steady yourself for your return to the rush of the holiday season. Tomorrow we celebrate Christmas Eve and then next week we prepare to enter the New Year. This year is racing to its close, the Holidays are almost past, and soon we will be back in ordinary time with darkness only slowly alleviated by lengthening days. We each must choose whether we carry Hope past the holidays and into the New Year. It is for us each to decide how we will approach the year we will call 2019. May we each find Hope and Love to carry through!

I close with:

A Winter Solstice Prayer by Edward Hays

The dark shadow of space leans over us.
We are mindful that the darkness of greed, exploitation, and hatred also lengthens its shadow over our small planet Earth.
As our ancestors feared death and evil and all the dark powers of winter, we fear that the darkness of war, discrimination, and selfishness may doom us and our planet to an eternal winter.

May we find hope in the lights we have kindled on this sacred night, hope in one another and in all who form the web-work of peace and justice that spans the world.

In the heart of every person on this Earth
burns the spark of luminous goodness;
in no heart is there total darkness.
May we who have celebrated this winter solstice,
by our lives and service, by our prayers and love,
call forth from one another the light and the love
that is hidden in every heart.
Amen.

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, Amen, and Happy Solstice!