

## **Devotion – First Week of Advent, 2021**

### **Rev. Jeanne Simpson**

I don't think it's an accident that the ancient church began to celebrate Christ's advent and birth in the winter, although evidence in the gospels indicates that he was probably born in the spring (Remember those shepherds who were watching over the flocks at night? That's because the ewes were lambing, and they do that in the spring!). In the winter ancient people became quite anxious about the cold and dark, wondering if the sun and warmth were going to come back. They had all kinds of pagan festivals related to fire and light, to assure themselves that all would be well – spring would come again, with a time to plant crops. The winter solstice marks the shortest day of the year, and ancient groups would have a huge bonfire, bring in a big "yule" log for the fireplace, and decorate an evergreen tree. Bringing in a tree and decorating it reassured them that the world outside was still alive, and that the sun would return for longer periods of time.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century the church fixed December 25 as the birth of Christ to correspond to the date of the winter solstice on the Roman calendar at that time. This date is exactly nine months after the Catholic Festival Day of Annunciation on March 25, also the date of the spring equinox. The word "Christmas" means "Christ's Mass," which is interesting since it literally means the service of the Eucharist, or Communion, by Christ. The Day of the Nativity, meaning the day of Christ's birth, may in fact be a better term. The first setting of December 25 wasn't necessarily the day that the church thought Jesus was born – it was the festival day for celebrating the birth. Besides, early Christians thought that birthday celebrations were pagan. But over time this all got "smushed" together into the day that Christ was born, including all kinds of hymns and anthems like "In the Bleak Midwinter" when we sing of Christ being born in bitter cold winter.

We've adapted a lot of pagan traditions for Christmas, like the yule log, Father Christmas or Santa Claus, bringing an evergreen tree into the house and decorating it, and giving gifts. But the central theme of the Christmas season is the anticipation of the birth of a Savior. We wait while the days grow shorter and the temperature begins to drop. We cluster around the hearth with a fire for not only warmth, but light. We wait for the renewal of the earth, the return of longer periods of daylight, and the promise from Isaiah to be fulfilled. So I leave you with these familiar words from Isaiah 40 (and Handel's Messiah):

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

May this time of anticipation and waiting be one of joy, peace, love, and hope for you.

***Jeanne***