

Devotion – Fourth Week of Advent, 2021

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December 21 is the day of the Winter Solstice in the Northern Hemisphere (it's June in the Southern Hemisphere), when daylight is the shortest of the year, and nighttime is the longest. That's when the North Pole is at its farthest tilt from the Sun, roughly 23.5 degrees. This past Saturday was also the longest full moon of the year – and the winter solstice was responsible for that also. During a full moon, the moon, sun, and earth line up in a 180-degree line. This allows the sun's rays of light to illuminate the entirety of the moon facing the earth. Because the winter solstice was near though, the sun's path appeared lower in the sky. This allowed the moon to appear higher in the sky. Together that helps to create the longest full moon of the year. In fact, the moon was full in the sky for over 15 hours from Saturday to Sunday. The Ursid meteor shower also peaked just hours after the December solstice.

Since prehistory, the winter solstice has been seen as a significant time of year in many cultures and has been marked by festivals and rituals. In ancient times, it marked the symbolic death and rebirth of the Sun. The seasonal significance of the winter solstice is in the reversal of the gradual lengthening of nights and shortening of days. In fact, late Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeological sites, such as Stonehenge in England and Newgrange in Ireland, were built to reflect the solstice. The primary axes of both of these monuments seem to have been carefully aligned on a sight-line pointing to the winter solstice sunrise (Newgrange) and the winter solstice sunset (Stonehenge).

Pagan Scandinavian and Germanic people of Northern Europe celebrated "Yul," to celebrate the return of the sun. Similarly, the Celtic Druids began the tradition of the Yule Log, with the intention of driving out darkness, evil spirits, and poor luck in the following year. The Yule Log was intended to be kept alight over the entire solstice period, twelve days over which the sun was believed to stand still. Additionally, evergreen plants were used in decoration - of key significance are "The Holly and the Ivy", used in decoration, and Mistletoe, suspended over a doorway in a token gesture of goodwill to all who passed under it. The Romans celebrated the sun god on December 25, when the winter solstice happened in the old Roman calendar, and in the early centuries after the Romans adopted Christianity, Jesus' birth was moved to this day, as the true Son of God, the replacement for the pagan sun god.

So that makes me wonder – what is it about Jesus that early Christians wanted to associate with the winter solstice, and these pagan celebrations of the return of the sun? And that leads me to John 1: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." We talk a lot about Jesus as light – he is the light of the world; the star that the Wise Men sought shines over the manger where he lies; he is the light that penetrates darkness. So it seems logical that early church fathers would want Jesus to replace pagan sun gods as the source of lengthening days, when the sun slowly begins to stay in the sky a little longer. God created light first in the Genesis story. Isaiah 9 says this: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." Light was not only critical to people over history who had little ability to light the darkness, except in small areas with torches and lanterns and firelight, but light has always symbolized godly power. And this baby's birth that we will celebrate the end of this week brings about the end of pagan sun gods and fear of darkness, because Jesus' light penetrates the entire world – heaven and earth, and every pore of our bodies. So at winter solstice we can rejoice that the birth of this child sends all the darkness of the world away with glorious, pulsing rays of life-giving, life-sustaining light.

Jeanne