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UU Congregation of Marin

"The Story of Christmas"

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Only five days to Christmas. The orange and black of jack-o-lanterns are long past. As the longest day of the year approaches, the red-browns of autumn like Indian corn are almost memory themselves. The reds, whites and greens of the Christmas celebration are upon us, ready to take us into the muted browns and grays of winter.

It's interesting the season's colors and how they change and shift. For me they are as much about this fall winter season as any holiday they bring in their wake.

As colored lights adorn the fronts of many homes, inside our hearts there is always some memory deep and trusting -- though sometimes shrouded -- which kindles an inner flame to warm us on these cool and darker days of Christmas. Be it through the colors of the season or some other connection, our memories of this time are such an important part of its meaning and importance.

Thank goodness for these images from the past, because for me the commercial market driven Christmas season we have today has all but totally masked so much of the warm and nurturing sweetness of Christmas: things like making a wreath from your own gathered greens, and then hanging it on the door; hauling pine or fir trees into the house and decorating them with fresh cranberries and popcorn strings sewn up on last year's fishing line; the after-dinner ritual of opening the day's window on the big Advent card; going out to find a Yule log that will not only fit in the fireplace but will burn through the long Christmas Eve night.

I wonder just how my grandchildren will remember these times when they have reached my age. Will they know the spirit of Christmas as I do? Will they know the damp smell of an old growth forest, an untamed wild river teeming with fish, a bursting sunset that reaches across the sky into a blue black star specked evening?

It's hard to say.

In this rapidly changing culture, in my lifetime, Christmas has become the most money driven time of year. It is a market mad and frantic rush to some un-tethered expectation. This does not

bode well for the memories of my grandchildren so I ponder at times just what they will be based on.

But we shouldn't discount the enduring power of a young child for whom all is new and magical in their own way. There is still hope that they will develop their own memories that are as sweet and warm in their hearts as the ones I carry in mine.

Maybe we all need to be reminded that what moves us at this time of year goes much deeper and much further back than our modern culture tries to tell us; further back than even the Christ story which has taken such a predominant place in this seasonal celebration. In fact, most of the rituals and traditions of this time of year address ancient stories, not the Christian myth.

All around the world and through thousands of years the greatest festivals of all times have been celebrated in this fall-to-winter time of the year. Since ancient times we have set altars to the cosmic dance, the unchangeable cyclic nature of our planet and its life sustaining sun. Before the church asserted its authority in this, these celebrations were called the festivals of "Iol," meaning wheel. And born from this tradition was the Roman Saturnalia, which grew in tandem with the Druid festivities of the Ivy and the

mistletoe which trailed on the path of the grim mythologies and rituals of the ancient Saxons.

The Roman celebration of Saturnalia is the root of much we think of as Christmas. It ran from December 17th to the 24th and had been practiced for hundreds of years before the Christian era. It was a time that the slaves enjoyed some semblance of freedom. In fact in Saturnalia some masters waited upon their slaves. A mock king was chosen by the slaves, from their own, to preside over them and command his "subjects." This feast traveled with the Romans North into Europe Britain and Saxon and became known there as "The Feast of Topsyturneydom."

In pagan Rome on Dec 22nd was Segillaria. This part of Saturnalia began with the Feast of the Dolls, featuring jugglers, acrobats, fanciful trinkets and food. On this day parents gave their children dolls and earthenware toys. Then on Kolendae Januarii, our New Years day, the Romans presented gifts to their friends and neighbors.

Another feature of this festival was the giving away of oil lamps to symbolize the return of the sun's power after the winter solstice had passed. The use of light at this time of year was universal in

religious rites, fire in many forms date back into antiquity. The ancient Jews at this time held a Feast of Lights where flames were lit. Much later Christians took up this ritual. When candles became available they became the flame of choice to honor the nativity. In fact the idea of the Holy Child being the Light of the world was spread by the use of candles. In some countries it is still a custom to burn candles all night at Christmas time.

A bit north and outside of the Roman influence the Saxons built sacred bonfires which they burned to the God Thor, who was the Son of Odin and the maker of thunder and lightning. This was the Feast of Yule, a ritual to bring back the warmth and the power of the sun. The Yule log (the same one we burn today in many homes at Christmas) was so sacred to the original ritual that a portion of it was always saved to start the next year's fire.

At the rise of Christendom, pagans had long realized the power of the sun and understood its life-giving agency. They had been enacting rituals during late December for hundreds of years which they called Sol Invictus, which meant, Sun Unconquered. These rituals contained fire burnings, songs, feasts and dances. It is from these celebrations we know of the first music associated with the season.

With this wealth of celebration and festivity in the later part of December a real dilemma was presented for the developing Catholic Church. So the early Church set out to place the birth of Christ to coincide with the time of year all of these long established winter festivals were held. Done even though the actual scriptures indicate the birth to have been sometime in early April.

(This would make Jesus an Aries or possibly a Taurus rather than a Capricorn. All of you that are astrologically inclined can chew on that one for a moment.)

The early Christian church endowed these old pagan rites and observances with new interpretations which set a strong foundation for the Christmas story. They knew of the power of this time and used it well in building its influence. As early as 598, the British Isles were being converted under the guiding hand of the newly arrived St. Augustine. The story tells that on Christmas Day of that year ten thousand converts were baptized.

The new Christian religion was accepted in Germany in the year 813. But, it was not until the tenth century that Norway began to become Christianized when King Hakon the Good, proclaimed in

law that the Festival of Yule should begin at the same time the Christian people had it.

At this time the Catholic Church was using the language of the sun, spelled s-u-n knowing it was compatible to the northern traditions.

Eventually more and more pagans became Christianized and they gave up the old Sol Invictus, or Sun Unconquered, and began singing hymns of praise to the Son, now spelled S-o-n that would over time become the Son of Righteousness. And so the old meanings slowly disappeared.

It was not until the year 1223 that the Christ child became an image in the Christmas celebrations. Up until this time all of the hymns had been essentially devotional and suggestive of the cloister speaking of the King of Kings.

But in the year 1223 St. Francis of Assisi presented the first Nativity play in the little village of Greccio. This was the first nativity play ever and it depicted the scene we all know on Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. St. Francis is the first monk we know of to address the Christ as a Child Jesus. He also used Mother

Mary for the first time as a predominant figure in the Christmas story. And it is at this time that the animals are first seen in the story.

When St. Francis began to preach about "The Little Brother of Mankind" rather than The King of Kings this was considered heresy. The only thing that saved him was that he was loved so deeply by the common folk of his village, and his father was close to the pope so he was not perused by the Church.

So what had been an overt attempt to convert a pagan world to Christianity by incorporation had been by any assessment quite a success. Over the years, with its own regional flavor, Christmas became the most common remembrance of this time, at least in the Western hemisphere. In Rome, Christmas is known today as the Feast of the Nativity; in Greece, Genethlia, also meaning the Feast of the Nativity; in the country side of Italy and Spain, it is Nativita and Navidad respectively, both meaning birthday; in France, it is Noel, meaning "news"; and in Germany they commemorate "Weihnacht" or the Holy Night. Our own name for Christmas, has an interesting derivation. The word 'mas,' taken from the ancient Hebrew, a word meaning tribute or offering. Thus the word Christmas is a Hebrew tribute to Christ.

So what we know now as the Christmas season is really an abundant package of traditional rituals, many based on pre-Christian cultures, with many of their symbols surviving. The Christ Child may have become the dominant symbol of this season but not the only symbol. All the trees, the greenery, the lights, the yule logs, the gifts, the singing, the festivals and foods, are all reminders of the pre-Christian foundations of this winter season's celebration. They are the surviving tangible memories of the old celebration of the longest night of the year, the line between the starlight and the sunlight, the rebirth of productivity abundance and beauty, of sensuality and growth; a signal of the coming of the spring and the summer and of the planting and of the harvesting.

Perhaps in these very roots which honor the anticipation and faith in the renewal of life's cycles, we can still embrace the Christ Child. Perhaps the birth of life, of any life, of all life, is the birth of the Christ, of the Yuletide, of the Saturnalia.

What symbol could speak to us more powerfully than the potential inferred in the birth of a human child? The Christmas story in its fullness is only an evolution in ritual and reverence that we the human species are called to express.

Over time Christmas has also become a beautiful and abundant time of celebration, bringing delight and renewed relationship with each other. Christmas, with its Santa and Elves, its candy canes and cookies, its eggnog and tangerines, lightens the heart and never ceases to bring a tear or two, a time or two, of joy and of care, for the little child, for the giving, for each other. There is something vibrant and nurturing in this season and I thank God for the turning of the star wheel and the rising of the sun. And for the pleasure of good friends and the richness found in caring.

Therefore, may this Christmas season be made once again memorable:

May it bring the joys and riches of ancient memories of the past to the ongoing embrace of life which sustains us all.

As you gather together to share the season's meal and gifts,
as you sing songs of celebration, of births, bright stars,
as you share warming love and laughter,
may new life, with all its tenacity and grace, find you
and be welcomed within your hearts.

Yes, Merry Christmas to each and to everyone!
Now and in the days to come.

So be it. And so it is.