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Darkness and Light: Celebrating Christmas

Several years ago, Karen and I were lucky enough to be in Bethlehem on the night when Christmas Eve is celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It was cold that night, and it got dark early. But the town was lighted everywhere, as we walked through its narrow streets and into Manger Square. On this darkest of nights, the Church of the Nativity, was filled with light – from oil lamps hung throughout. People milled about – inside the church -- carrying their children, greeting their friends, and socializing. Located under the main altar is a crypt that is believed to mark the spot of Jesus' actual birth. The space was crowded with priests and worshippers, and the air was heavy with smoke and incense. A sense of anticipation and excitement filled the ancient church. The winter holidays that we celebrate – Christmas, Hanukkah, and winter solstice – are filled with images of the light that cheers us and drives away the dark.

This year, our mid-December service – two weeks from today at the Sonora Senior Center – will be a celebration of this turning towards the light at the darkest time of the year. December 21st marks the turning of the seasons; as solstice nears, the sun is with us just a little bit less every day. The days are short, the nights are long, and the climate is cold. And each day from solstice onward will get just a little bit longer – the warmth of the sun will begin to return, and eventually it will be spring again. Picture an ancient world with no electricity, a culture dependent on the rhythms of nature. Think how scary it must have been to see the days grow shorter. Would the sun return? Would the world become warm again, so that plants would grow? People gathered around their fires for warmth and for company. The crops had been harvested; the hunting was done. Without work to do, people ate and drank what they had gathered that year, and they danced and sang.

Virtually every culture in the world has held an observance of the winter solstice, the day that marks the turning of the seasons at the darkest time of the year. Solstice was known as "Sacaia" to the Mesopotamians, as the festival of "Kronos" to the ancient Greeks, and as "Saturnalia" to the Romans. Scandinavian peoples abstained from hunting and fishing for the 12 days of "Yule," as a way of letting the weary world rest and to hasten the reappearance of the sun. In autumn, the days got shorter and the crops were harvested, and the people thought of winter as the dark time, the time when everything seemed to be dying and lifeless. Solstice marks the time when the great wheel of life shudders and turns, and the people stopped between these two worlds -- between light and dark, and between life and death. It was a day when they looked both forward and backwards.

Centuries after the death of Jesus, Christians celebrated his birth to coincide with pre-existing celebrations of winter solstice. I think this is more than just a random choice – the two observances are more connected than we generally acknowledge.

Many traditions that we connect with Christmas actually originated in pre-Christian pagan rituals. In ancient times, for example, people went out into the forest,

they cut down firs and evergreens, and they brought them home and decorated with them. They considered pine and fir trees to be sacred because they remain green through the winter. Decorating their trees with fruits, berries, and flowers symbolized the hope for return of summer's bounty.

Our ancestors in the New World – pilgrims and puritans – tried to ban the custom of bringing decorated trees into people's homes at Christmas, but the custom was so beloved that it persisted. This pagan custom – which celebrates nature – remains a treasured element of the Christmas season.

Christmas wreaths also have ancient roots. The wreath's circle symbolized the wheel of the year and the completion of another cycle. Wreaths were often made of holly, which symbolized the female element, and ivy, which represented the male. Kissing under the mistletoe is an old Druid tradition from England. Mistletoe was considered to be sacred because it grew mysteriously on the oak, which was considered to be the most sacred tree. Some Christian churches ban mistletoe to this day because of its pagan origins.

Burning the Yule log is perhaps the oldest of the Yule traditions. Because winter solstice was a solar holiday, people celebrating it often used fire in different forms, such as candles and bonfires to provide heat and light during the darkest part of winter. Traditionally, the Yule log was made of oak and it was supposed to burn for the 12 days of "Yule."

[PAUSE]

December also marks the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. For many centuries, the Hebrew people lived under the oppressive rule of various invading powers. After the time of the great kings, David and Solomon, the Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judea were successively invaded by Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, and Greeks, to name but a few. But, during the Second Century before the Common Era, the Hebrew people rebelled, and for a brief time, won their freedom from foreign rule. Antiochus Epiphanes, the king of the Syrian branch of Alexander the Great's Empire, decreed that local religions, including Judaism should be stamped out. Hellenistic Syrian armies invaded Jerusalem and – at the Winter solstice – they rededicated the Jewish temple to a pagan deity. The Jews carried out a protracted guerilla war in the hills and forests of Palestine, under Mattathias, the priest, and his five sons, who came to be called the Maccabees.

After a three-year campaign, the Maccabees succeeded in recapturing Jerusalem and in retaking the temple. At the winter solstice – exactly three years after the temple's desecration – they re-lighted the temple menorah. They had found only enough consecrated oil to last for one day, but, miraculously, the flame lasted for eight days.

Jews honor these events by lighting one candle each night on a menorah that has nine branches, one for the servant light, and eight to commemorate the miracle of the oil that lasted for eight days. The menorah is often placed in an outside window to proclaim to the world the miracle of the temple lights.

[PAUSE]

And then we come to Christmas -- the celebration of the birth of the infant Jesus. Just a year ago, the film, "The Nativity Story," was released. It did a beautiful job of telling the traditional story of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph are portrayed well as scared

teenagers, who are nonetheless determined to carry through with what they believe they were told by angels. The movie does something that is common today – it takes the different gospel narratives from Matthew and Luke and conflates them into one narrative. Although the star and the wise men appear only in Matthew, and the shepherds and manger appear only in Luke, the story as told in the movie, and as seen in countless nativity scenes, includes both these elements.

Only Matthew contains the story of the vengeful King Herod who fears prophecies of the coming of a messiah to lead the Jews. In Matthew, and in the movie, Herod tries to enlist the three wise men in a plot to kill the infant Jesus. Also in Matthew, the young family flees at the last minute to Egypt to escape Herod's soldiers who have been ordered to kill all the male babies in Bethlehem. Matthew's version of the story portrays Jesus as a descendent of the ancient King David, and places Jesus within various prophecies about the coming of a ruler who will lead the Jews out of their oppression. It is a story filled with danger and violence.

The nativity story in Luke, on the other hand, focuses more on the promise Jesus' birth holds for the future. It portrays an atmosphere of celebration and serenity; its story is told delicately and with restraint. We have the story of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and of the birth in a stable. There is no star, but there are shepherds in the fields, watching over their flocks at night. An angel appears to them, and suddenly their world is shot through with light. The angel tells them about the baby and where to find him.

[Pause]

Superficially, the stories behind these three winter holidays seem worlds apart. And yet, if we look closely, we see how each of the stories contains a common theme – the presence of light in the darkest time of the year. This juxtaposition of Christmas with Winter Solstice and Hanukkah is neither random or coincidental. These three holidays are celebrated at the very darkest time of the year; the time when the days are shortest and coldest. In part, I think, they are meant to remind us that life is a great circle – that although it is dark now, the light will return, spring will come again, plants will grow again. Solstice celebrations make this very clear; they take us back to a time when people were much closer to the cycles of nature. There wasn't much to do in the winter, in the dark and the cold. People huddled inside around their fires, they told stories, and they danced and sang. They needed their fires to remind them that there was still light in the world, that the sun would return in the spring, with its life-giving warmth.

And Hanukkah, too, is a story of light and darkness. When the Maccabees recapture Jerusalem, and reconsecrate their temple, they are afraid there will not be enough light to enable them to complete the ceremony. But, miraculously, the oil lasts for eight days.

Themes of darkness and light suffuse the Christmas story as well. A magical star leads the wise men to Bethlehem to find the child of prophecy. The angel appears to the shepherds, and the light shining around him lights up the night sky in the fields around Bethlehem.

So, one of the messages of these stories is that even when things are at the darkest, light will come again. The seasons will turn, the oil will last longer than we thought possible, the light of hope will lead us to find a favored child who will bring promise for the future of humankind.

But, I would suggest, there is more to these tales of light and darkness. The world needs the darkness just as much as it needs the light. Plants can't grow all the time; the soil needs time to lie fallow, to rest. And people need time to rest from their labors. But beyond that, the darkness provides us with a time to confront the other side of life – sadness, oppression, suffering, violence, death. Especially in our Christmas celebrations, I think, we focus on the light but we forget to honor the darkness. Remember that in Matthew's version of the nativity story, Herod's anger and fear, and the resulting violence are part of the story as well. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph escape narrowly from Herod's soldiers and are forced to flee to Egypt, where they remain until Herod has died. Only then, are they able to return to Nazareth.

And one of the things I like about the recent movie on the Nativity is that the characters are shown as poor people who live an oppressed existence, including Joseph and Mary and their families. They are dirty and ill-fed, often without enough to eat. When the shepherds appear at the manger, they aren't clothed in robes of shining white. They're a pretty scruffy-looking bunch, as you would expect of people living out in the fields with their sheep.

To let these stories remind us of the darker aspects of life is important. No life consists only of light. We all have our times of darkness, of despair, of anger, of violent thoughts. It is good to be reminded of this darker side. As individuals, and as nations, we ignore our darker sides at our peril. Karl Jung, of course, referred to this darker side – individually and collectively – as the shadow. We need to be aware, as people and as societies, that we all possess a darker side – each and every one of us. And when we live with an awareness of that darker side, we are able to choose the light. We are able to live with our darkest selves, and to make a conscious choice to act in accordance with our better selves.

We don't have to look far to see this working in the world today. Leaders around the world act out of an assurance that they are wholly in the right and their motives are pure. The greatest damage is always done when leaders see issues in terms of absolute right and wrong, and when they refuse to acknowledge that they might be acting out of their darker impulses. Such leaders remind us of Herod in the Bible story – so sure that he was right and that it was up to him to kill babies in order to prevent fulfillment of a prophecy. Such leaders motivate, and manipulate, their followers with fear, fear of those who are different from us, fear of the "other."

Jesus brought to the world a message of hope, of a world based on love and compassion, not on fear and hatred. He spoke of a radical new social order that included all who had been outcasts. And he talked of a "Kingdom of God" that is all around us, "but people don't see it." If we are to take up Jesus' message of hope for a world of compassion and love, we first need to perceive that all humans, and their institutions, also have a darker side – a side of fear, and hatred, and violence. And we must choose to follow the path of hope, recognizing that we are capable of following the darker path as well.

And so, we can find in the winter holidays a way to recognize and to honor the darkness. And by doing so, we enable ourselves to choose to move into the light, to follow the path that Jesus and so many great religious leaders have pointed to – the path toward a world of hope, of love, of caring – for each other and for all the world's creatures.

May it be so! Blessed be! And Amen!