

DECEMBER 25, 2008
THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD
“LIGHT FOR OUR DARKNESS”
St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church

Let us pray: Thank you for the great good news of Christmas, O God, that what came to birth in the baby Jesus is the light of all people, and that because of Christmas light shines in the darkness, and the darkness of our world is not able to overcome it. It’s in the name of Jesus that I pray. Amen.

You heard it in the words of the prophet in last night’s reading: “*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.**” And you heard it again in today’s Christmas story according to St. John: “*The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*” Which reminds me of the words of the first Epistle of John where we hear the gospel proclaimed most radically and simply of all: “*This is the message we have heard**

*from him and proclaim to you, that **God is light and in him there is no darkness at all***—no darkness at all!

Christmas, my friends, is, of course, the birthday of Jesus, son of Mary and longed-for Messiah of God. But Christmas is also the **festival of light** par excellence, a nature festival, a pagan rite of nature that commemorates and celebrates the return of the sun, which we know as the winter solstice, the turning point of the year from which the sun daily begins to burn more brightly and warmly and longer.

In the ancient Roman calendar this day was known as “*Natalis Soli Invicti*,” the birthday of the Invincible Sun—S-U-N, the idea being that the Sun was born on this day and that it grew every day thereafter. In imperial Rome the emperor Aurelian dedicated in the third century after Christ a magnificent new temple of the Sun and established a college of priests to cultivate the worship of the Sun God, which, by the time of Constantine the Great, fifty years later, had

become the supreme deity of the Roman Empire.

The upshot, as you might suspect, was that when Constantine first made Christianity licit in the empire and then later as it was established as the official religion of the Empire, the problem for contemporary imperial Roman piety was how to replace the worship of the Sun God with the worship of the Son—S-O-N of God, Jesus Christ. And to a large extent, December 25th—the birthday of the unconquerable sun, S-U-N, which also in some Christian circles had been celebrated as the birthday of Jesus—became a battleground, which it, of course, still is, 1700 years later. Today the battle which continues to be fiercely raged in our American culture, is what some describe as the campaign to “keep Christ in Christmas.”

But from a more historically honest point of view we might better call it the campaign to “**get Christ into Christmas**”—or at least into our natural, in-born urge to celebrate like

good pagans the winter solstice and the return of the sun—S-U-N.

The major tactic the church has used over the years to “Christianize” an essentially pagan festival has been a shrewd but also dangerous one—that of assimilating the heart of the solstice festival into its own language and imagery and liturgy and especially its hymnody. I took a little time last week to page through our new ELW hymn book, taking note of those Advent and Christmas and Epiphany hymns and carols that utilize light and especially sun imagery. I’d like you for a few moments to lean back and, if you’d like, pull out your ELW, and consider with me just how successfully and cleverly our favorite seasonal Christian songs have **co-opted** the winter solstice and its light and darkness contrasts in favor of our celebration of the Nativity of our Lord.

Take for example, the 6th verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” #257 in ELW, which we sang just last Sunday:

O, come, O Dayspring, come and cheer;

*O Sun (S-U-N) of justice, now draw near
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Or how about these words from the old Latin Advent hymn, “Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding!,” #246 in ELW which we at Church of the Master sang two Sundays ago:

*Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!
“Christ is near,” we hear the cry.
“Cast away the works of **darkness**,
All you children of the **day!**”*

If you're still not convinced, listen to verse 2:

*Wakened by the solemn warning,
From earth's bondage let us rise;
**Christ, our sun (S-U-N), all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.***

Other Advent hymns would include Philip Nicolai's “King of Chorales”,’ “**Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying,**” #436 in ELW which we sang on the first Sunday in Advent and contains the words in its first verse:

*“Come forth, you maidens! **Night is past.**
The bridegroom comes! **Awake;**
Your **lamps** with gladness take!” Alleluia!*

*Prepare yourselves to meet the Lord,
Whose light has stirred the waiting guard.*
And in the next verse we hear of Zion
Her star is ris'n; her light is come.
Or how about the old Latin hymn attributed
originally to St. Ambrose in the 4th century AD,
and set to an old German tune #263, “Savior of the
Nations, Come” which in its verse 5 sings:

*Now your manger, shining bright,
Hallows night with newborn light.
Night cannot this light subdue;
Let our faith shine ever new.*

Or, lest you think, this is only a fixation of
older hymnody how about the new hymn by Susan
Cherwien on the facing page, #261?

*As the dark awaits the dawn,
So we await your light.
O Star of promise, scatter night,
Loving bright, loving bright,
Till shades of fear are gone.*

Cherwien goes on in further verses to sing of “the
blue expectant hour before the **silv’ring skies**”
when “we long to see your **day arise...O lucent
Morning Star.**” She then goes on:

*As the moon reflects the sun
Until the night's decrease,
May we your **healing light** release,
Living peace, living peace,
Until your **holy dawn**.*

And she concludes in verse 4:

***Shine your future** on this place,
Enlighten ev'ry guest,
That through us stream your holiness,
Bright and blest, bright and blest;
Come dawn, O Sun (S-U-N) of grace."*

Even the tune of the hymn composed by Carl Schalk is entitled "**Lucent**."

Or how about Philip Nicolai's other great chorale, many of us will be singing during Epiphany, #308, which begins:

***O Morning Star, how fair and bright!**
You shine with God's own truth and **light,**
Aglow with grace and mercy!*

Or how about the hymn we used to sing to the same tune, "All Hail to You, O Blessed Morn!" which in its fourth verse sings:

***For our redemption still he comes.**
In him shines, like a thousand suns,*

God's mercy clouded never.
Or how about the second verse of the Catalonian
carol, #299, "Cold December Flies Away?"

*In the hopeless time of sin
Shadows deep had fallen.
All the world lay under death,
Eyes were closed in **sleeping**.
But when all seemed lost in **night**,
Came the **sun** (S-U-N) whose **golden light**
Brings the endless joy
Of our hope, highest hope,
Of our hope's **bright dawning**,
Son (S-O-N) beloved of heaven.*

And even our most beloved and familiar carols
sing, as in the third verse of Charles Wesley's
favorite, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing":

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the **sun** (S-U-N) of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Ris'n with healing in his wings.*

And finally, not to be forgotten, is the third verse
of the hymn which we probably all sang last night:

*Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's **pure light**,*

*Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at your birth,
Jesus, Lord at your birth.*

So what, you say? What if light and particularly sun imagery do abound in our popular celebration of Christ's birth? Is that bad? Is it to be regretted that the birth of the little baby in the manger, "he whom shepherds once came praising," "so long and far away" in "Bethlehem, in Bethlehem" is also celebrated as the "dawning of the Sun (S-U-N) of Righteousness," as "the highest, most holy, Light of Light eternal," as we sing in "O Come All Ye Faithful" and not only the Son—S-O-N- of Mary? Is it to be finally regretted that the church's festival of the incarnation—the celebration of the great glad tidings of God becoming human in the infant Jesus—struggles to be observed in the context that so much of the world outside the church celebrates as a sort of winter carnival/spending spree? Would it be better if we in the church celebrated Christmas in March—or in July—or in October?

I don't think so. I think that on balance, the church has done well in its centuries-old struggle to put Christ into the Solstice celebration, although not everyone sees it that way—including both the uptight Christian right that wants manger scenes in every public square, and the anti-religious left that wants the church to keep our religious holy-days private and to ourselves. A favorite irreverent NYer cartoon caught the silliness of much of the dispute just right as it pictured a man shopping, standing dumbfounded in front of a store window featuring a teddy bear that bore a price tag reading \$179.95. “Christ!” the balloon above his head tells us what he's thinking as the caption to the cartoon reads, “Putting the Christ back into Christmas.”

I'm something of a contrarian on this matter, however, since it seems only fitting to me that we should celebrate Christmas, the festival of the Word made Flesh, in the midst of a world seemingly gone crazy with excess—of partying, and shopping, and eating, and phony, sentimental music written by the likes of Irving Berlin, of bad movies on tv, and also, if we're honest, sometimes an excess of family visits, and of efforts of good

will, and gift-giving and receiving—a kind of saturnalia of the spirit, as our bodies indeed—even here in southern California—yearn for the return of the sun and the lengthening of the days. For this time of year—this solstice time—is **the world at its most worldly**—its **most earthy**—at its best and its worst—and we humans at our most human, both good and bad. And if the Christmas story can't get itself a hearing now—amid the bustle and blatant materialism of this season—maybe, just maybe, it isn't such good news of great joy after all, as the angels claimed—news of great joy to “all the people” and not just us church-going types.

In proclaiming the birth of the infant Jesus as the dawning of the invincible Sun (S-U-N), the church took the good news to the heart of the worldly opposition of its day and every day saying “the Son of God, Jesus Christ, makes your imperial sun god look like a flashlight with weak batteries.” If you want to truly celebrate life and light and warmth and hope and creation, then join in with us who celebrate the birth of the one who as a little baby, the most vulnerable and harmless of God's creatures, “came among us at Christmastide, at

Christmastide, in Bethlehem.” For he is the true Sun of righteousness, the light for our very particular darkness, the “highest most holy light of light eternal,” who makes your Apollos and Amon-Res and Sol Invicti and all your other little sun gods and goddesses pale into insignificance. For this baby Jesus alone is the One who “comes and loves and saves and frees us.” He is the One alone who enters into our human darkness with the promise of being God’s light for our world, the whole, wide world!

Happy Christmas!

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.