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### The Days Are Getting Longer

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christmas Eve 1997:  
Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Most of us have some fear of darkness. No matter how old or young we are, we fear the darkness. As children we saw in the darkness monsters and other creatures, like the giants pictured in my childhood copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. We never entirely outgrow our fears of darkness. As adults we may not fear monsters in the dark. More likely we fear the dark because we can't see as well and we're afraid we'll stumble and fall especially as we grow older. And we fear the darkness because it may conceal robbers and muggers. For all these reasons most of us fear darkness.

But on Sunday afternoon something happened that brings joy to all people who fear the darkness. The event took place at 3:07 p.m. EST on December 21st. We call it the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. For thousands of years people have looked out on the cold, dark world on December 21st and said, "It's as dark as it's going to get! Tomorrow will be a little brighter! January will be brighter! March, April and May will be brighter still! The days are getting longer. If we've made it up to this point, if sickness hasn't taken us, if we've managed to make it over this hump, there's a good chance that we'll make it to Springtime (Paul Smith, Toronto). The harvest is in. It's not yet time to plant again. We're stuck indoors with each other. So let's eat, drink, and be merry because the sun is returning! Let's party!"

Ancient Romans celebrated the winter solstice. Long before Christians celebrated Christmas the pagan Emperor Aurelian decreed December 25th to be a special holiday celebrating the birthday of the *Unconquered Sun*. "Forget all your grudges and quarrels!" he said. "Close the schools and businesses! Shut down the government! Tell the legions to postpone wars! Here comes the sun! We're going to party!" And on December 25th the ancient pagan Romans exchanged gifts! They feasted! They sang songs! They decorated their houses with lights and evergreens! They were kind to poor people! Did you know that they even made evergreen wreaths? The circular shape of the wreath was a symbol of the unconquered sun that was beginning

to return. If ancient Romans came to Oxford tonight they'd see the Christmas wreathes, they'd see all the lights, and they'd think, "They're celebrating the return of the sun!"

And long before the birth of Jesus the German barbarians living north of the Rhine celebrated around December 25. At this time of the year, in their northern climate, the sun doesn't come up until 9 in the morning and sets at about 3 in the afternoon. So December 21st was a great turning point for the Norsemen and the Germanic tribes in northern Europe. A few days after the winter solstice they celebrated Yuletide. They got a great big oak Yule log and burned it in honor of the rebirth of the God Frey at the darkest point of winter. So, long before Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus, a large part of the world threw a big party near the end of December to celebrate the lengthening days.

Christians first celebrated Christmas on December 25 over 300 years after the birth of Christ. Up till the 3rd century Christians gave little thought to the time of the birth of Jesus. The big celebration for Christians was the weekly celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the sacrament of Holy Communion. That was what was most important. Christians didn't seem to know or even care about what time of the year Jesus was born. But, slowly, they began to wonder. Clement of Alexandria, who lived around 200 years after the birth of Jesus, suggested that Jesus was born in May. Not until late in the 4th century did Christians begin to celebrate the birth of Jesus in December. The earliest mention of the celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25 was in A.D. 336 during the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor.

Now, it's not hard to understand why Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus just when the whole world was celebrating the rebirth of the sun. It's kind of like what happens today among some Christians who don't want their kids to go to the prom where there'll be dancing and often drinking afterwards. So on prom night they plan a big party for their young people. They do everything to make their party more exciting than the prom. Well, that's what the early Christians did. "Everybody's celebrating the rebirth of the Sun," they said. "Let's celebrate the birthday of the Son of God." And it's no accident that the Germanic roots of our language use the same word

for the *sun* which shines in the sky and the *son* of God who is the light of the world. It's no accident that, at Christmas, we sing songs like,

~~The holly and the ivy~~ The rising of the sun  
~~The rising of the sun~~ And the running of the deer  
The playing of the merry organ  
Sweet singing in the choir.

Or we sing,

Break Forth, O Beauteous, Heavenly Light  
And usher in the morning.

Christians used the pagan celebration of the rebirth of the sun evangelistically. They adopted many of the features of the pagan celebrations to point men and women to Jesus Christ. Missionaries went to people who *walked in darkness, who lived in a land of deep darkness* and told them about Jesus, the Light of the World. And many believed! They said to the pagans who celebrated the rebirth of the sun, "Let us tell you about the One who created the sun, who is the Light of the world, the True Light which enlightens everyone."

Some Christians <sup>reject</sup> reject Christmas celebrations because they say it's all pagan. "If you use Christmas trees and evergreen wreaths and lights and give gifts and eat and drink you're celebrating a heathen holiday. You're no better than people who worshipped Frey or the Unconquered Sun." Did you know that the Puritans banned Christmas because of its pagan roots? Mincemeat pies were outlawed in New England for awhile. Some Puritan discover<sup>ed</sup> that mincemeat pies were used in Yule celebrations so the Puritans banned mincemeat pie. It was against the law, for awhile, to take off work on Christmas day.

Well, I don't have much patience with that attitude. There's nothing inherently pagan about mincemeat pies! And there's nothing wrong with Christmas trees and evergreens. God made the trees. And there's nothing inherently pagan about lights. God led Wisemen to Jesus by the light of a star. And there's nothing wrong with singing. God gave us voices to sing. And there's nothing wrong with eating, drinking, and making merry as long as we don't drink too much and get drunk, and as long as we don't drink and drive, and NO underage drinking. We need to be sensitive to the fact that Christmas is a very difficult time of the year for alcoholics and problem drinkers. We need

to be careful not to put stumbling blocks in their path. But with those warnings, let's celebrate! One reason early Christians won out over the pagans is that Christians out-partied their pagan neighbors when they celebrated the birthday of Jesus. The early Christians not only *out thought* the pagans, and *out loved* them, they *out partied* them as well.

But in all our partying let's remember what Allie Christos told us during *Joys and Concerns* last Sunday, that Jesus came to die on the cross, to forgive our sins, and to be our Savior. Christians would have *never* celebrated the birth of Jesus had he not arisen from the dead, if he were not the Risen Lord. So tell your children and neighbors and friends the true meaning of Christmas! Do what our Christian ancestors did! Use the winter celebrations evangelistically to point people to Jesus. The Advent candles are symbols of the coming of Jesus as the Light of the World. St. John wrote, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*" Decorate our houses with evergreens that don't die in the winter. Let evergreens remind us that Jesus was '*born that we no more may die.*' And bring an evergreen tree in the house and decorate it. Let it remind us of the *Tree of Life* upon which Jesus died to forgive our sins. And let's give gifts to our friends and especially to our enemies to remind us that "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*" And let's sing! Let's teach the world to sing, to sing in perfect harmony! Let's put the story of Jesus to the most beautiful music in the world: classical music, folk music, rock and roll music, blues, reggae, rap. Let's use art and poetry and dance and all the cultural forms to let others know that Jesus is the Light of the world. And let's remember that the sun shines on the righteous and on the unrighteous. And it follows that all people, whether they believe or not, are enlightened, as St. John says, by the true light, Jesus Christ. He enables us to see things as they really are. And when we turn in faith to Jesus Christ we meet, not a stranger, but One who loved and chose us before the foundation of the world.

Eternal God,  
who made this most holy night  
to shine with the brightness of your one true light:  
bring us who have known the revelation of that light on earth,  
to see the radiance of your heavenly glory;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.