

December 24, 2019
Christmas Eve (Christmas I)
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Saturday was the winter solstice—the first day of winter and the *shortest day* of the year. To begin the *longest night* of the year here in New Haven, on Saturday evening there was a luminary walk next door in Edgerton Park. Luminaries were set out along either side of the Park paths; there were special events in the Carriage House. A small group of us from the Church set up a table on the sidewalk across from the Park entrance on Cliff Street near Whitney Avenue. We gave away hot cocoa, hot tea, and homemade cookies, for which we had a steady stream of takers. It was a beautiful night to be outside, the energy was festive, and the luminary-lit park was lovely.

After we'd run out of everything and gone home, it occurred to me that the Church had arguably just participated in a pagan celebration. If so, well, there's a long history of that. If you can't beat 'em, you can either join 'em or try to steal their holidays.

The first recorded instance of Christians observing Jesus' birth on December 25 doesn't show up until 300 years after his death. By then, Roman Emperor Constantine had taken Christianity mainstream. The Roman pagans of the day were still observing the festival of Saturnalia for several days around the winter solstice. It seems likely that Christianity needed a competing option. As Christianity spread, Christmas appropriated traditions from pagan solstice celebrations in other regions. We have the Celtic Druids to thank for yule logs and mistletoe and holly.

A millennium or so later, the Puritans would have none of that. Condemning “residual papist idolatry,” they mockingly called Christmas “Foolstide.”¹ They wanted to cleanse the body of Christ of its accessories, and in the 17th century they gained the political power to do so. Puritans in England, Scotland, and right here in New England outlawed Christmas altogether, thereby stealing Christmas more effectively than any Scrooge or Grinch. A broadside published in 1659 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the future Boston,² says this:

PUBLICK NOTICE

The Observation of CHRISTMAS having been deemed
a Sacrilege, the exchanging of Gifts and Greetings,
dressing in Fine Clothing, Feasting, and similar
Satanical Practices are hereby

FORBIDDEN

with the Offender liable to a Fine of FIVE SHILLINGS³

Those guys were serious! Forget Starbucks; the first war on Christmas was actually conducted by Christian reactionaries. As one article describes it, “The Puritan War on Christmas Was the *Best* War on Christmas” (emphasis mine).⁴ Those Puritans were Grinchy, but they also had a point: there is nothing in Christian scripture to support setting Jesus’ birthday as December 25; there is nothing in Christian scripture to justify any feast day celebration.

Scriptural or not, Jesus had to have been born on some particular day. We will never know what it was, but Jesus still deserves a party. Regardless of what the pagans were up to, it makes sense that Christians would celebrate Jesus’ birth near the winter solstice. After all, the Gospel of John lacks a nativity story, but it opens with this: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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.”

Remember, of the four gospels, only Matthew and Luke offer information about Jesus’ birth, and their two accounts differ in ways that can’t be reconciled. If one was inclined to biblical literalism, this would pose a quandary. Fortunately, we aren’t looking for fact; we’re looking for truth. An important truth that we Christians profess is that God came to us as the human Jesus. With expert storytelling, Luke animates that profession of faith with people we can relate to: Jesus is a real baby, born to a real mother, surrounded by a real adoring community. Notice that the shepherds’ attention is captured via the night sky, and only then does their vision turn to the baby Jesus. They utterly occupy their landscape: in landscape they see the revelation of God’s involvement with creation; through landscape they get evidence that the Earth has become the habitation of the divine.

I must admit, I share some of the Puritan dismay with the cultural celebration of Christmas. I wouldn’t get rid of it, but I would change it. By tomorrow evening at this time the radio stations will have stopped playing Christmas carols; the next morning retail outlets will move on to Valentine’s Day. But Christmas is actually just now getting started. Let’s resist the momentum that will take it flying right past. Christmas is the season of hope; hope is surely something we sorely need right now. We get twelve days of Christmas, twelve days to pause with wonder, twelve days to remember this: in Jesus God became flesh and occupied the world; through Jesus God made all creation holy. If our pausing is attached to the sun or the moon or a tree or a pond or a fox, then, maybe, we have something in common with pagans, at least those of the Celtic variety. We aren’t likely to start worshipping trees, but trees surely do call us to worship God.

There was an article in the news this week about scientists discovering the world’s oldest arboreal forest.⁵ If you’re interested, I posted a link to the article on the church Facebook page. That forest, located in Cairo, New York, is 385 million years old. The site includes not only fossilized trees, but, somewhat incredibly, “the pristinely preserved remnants of an elaborate system of roots.” The article begins with this: “At three trillion strong, Earth’s trees are estimated to outnumber the stars in the Milky Way. These woody wonders sponge carbon dioxide out of the skies, brace soil against erosion, cycle water through ecosystems and support countless forms of life. And we largely have their sophisticated root systems to thank.”

Part of what was so striking about the article is its lead photograph: an aerial view of the site, which clearly shows that fossilized root system, a network of branching arteries reaching out 18 feet from the central trunk. I saw that photograph, and it made me think of photographs I have seen of placenta laid out after a birth.⁶ Maybe it's just me, or maybe it's just the season, and I was thinking about Mary and Jesus and a manger.

Through Mary and Jesus and shepherds and angels, we learn that *our* experience as human beings on earth carries divine significance. Thanks to Jesus, life on earth is sacramental. Holiness is everywhere we turn. If we turn now, we see the light returning to the world. God is love, carried by a tiny baby. To us a child is born; Come, let us adore him.

Growing up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I barely noticed the cycles of the sun. But then, at age 22, I moved to Fairbanks, Alaska. Winter in Fairbanks is both intensely beautiful and severely brutal. On the winter solstice the time between sunrise and sunset is 3 hours and 42 minutes. To put it another way, the time between sunset and sunrise is 20 hours and 18 minutes. In Fairbanks this past Saturday, the high temperature was -20 and the low was -25. Admittedly, that's colder than the historical average for the day, but still nowhere near the record low of -53. On the solstice, the worst of winter is yet to come—but at least the light begins its return.

In Fairbanks, the elaborate choreography and elemental drama of the shifting seasons is a shout for attention. Thank goodness, as close attention affords both physical survival and spiritual reward. This is the kind of attention that God's creation deserves, whether a person lives in Fairbanks, Alaska; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; or New Haven, Connecticut. A late addition to this sermon: I found out that the greens in the arrangement in front of the altar were cut yesterday from the holly and tamarack trees outside the church, and the cones in the windowsills came from the tamaracks earlier this year.

During this Christmastide, during this Foolstide, pay close attention to God's miraculous creation, and see the light of the world. I promise you, it will sometimes seem as if a multitude of heavenly hosts is singing. And if not them, maybe it will just be us, "praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"⁷

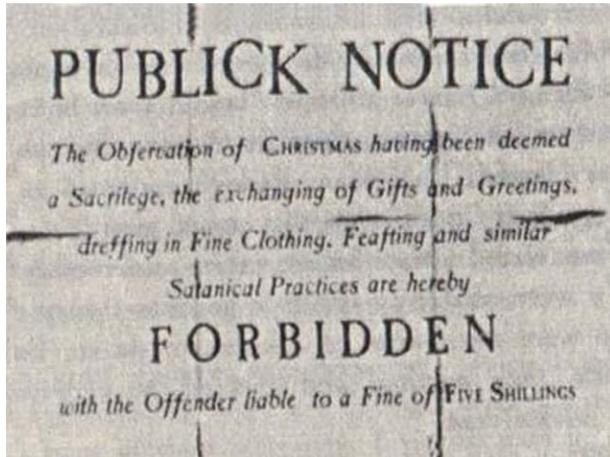
Notes

¹ “Christmas in Puritan New England,” *Wikipedia*, available online at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_in_Puritan_New_England (accessed December 24, 2019).

² “Polytheism is the Reason for the Season,” posted on the blog *Wyrd Designs*, December 13, 2019, available online at <https://wyrddesigns.wordpress.com/tag/foolstide/> (accessed December 24, 2019).

³ Ibid. Here is an image of the original:



⁴ Abby Ohlheiser, The Puritan War on Christmas Was the Best War on Christmas, *The Atlantic*, December 11, 2013, available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/12/puritan-war-christmas-was-best-war-christmas/355705/> (accessed December 24, 2019).

⁵ Katherine J. Wu, The World’s Oldest Forest Has 385-Million-Year-Old Tree Roots, *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 19, 2019, available online at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/385-million-year-old-fossils-reveal-worlds-oldest-forest-had-modern-tree-roots-180973810/> (accessed December 24, 2019). Here is the image mentioned:



⁶ See for example, the photographs by Jan McCrae in “The Incredible Placenta,” on the website for Jan McCrae Photography, June 5, 2013, available online at <http://www.janmccraephoto.com/birth-photography/the-incredible-placenta/> (accessed December 24, 2019).

⁷ Luke 2:13b-14 NRSV.