**The Friendly Ghost of Christmas Past**

**Text: Psalm 98:4-6**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**December 30, 2018**

There was a statistic in USA Today on Friday that caught my attention. 53% of Americans think that Christmas decorations should come down before New Year’s Day. Let’s do our own little survey here. How many of you think that Christmas decorations should be down by New Year’s? You know what my response is to that? Bah. Humbug!

Christmas is not just one day; it’s a season. It starts on December 25 and runs through January 5th or 6th, depending on who’s counting. Those would be the 12 days of Christmas. And we try to honor them all in our home. Not that Helen gave me 6 geese a-laying this morning; I can’t even begin to imagine the mess that would’ve been! But during those 12 days we keep the tree up and the lights on, we happily receive Christmas cards (and sometimes get around to sending out our own), and we continue to play Christmas CDs.

The 12 days of Christmas. They.ve been on the Church calendar for the better part of 2,000 years, but the practice predates Christianity. Indeed, *many* of our Christmas traditions predate the birth of Jesus. They are rooted in pagan practices surrounding the observance of the Winter Solstice. They come out of the growing darkness of northern Europe. As the weather turned colder and the days grew shorter, the people feared that the sun and its warmth might never return; that the light that sustains life might be gone forever. So in those Germanic lands, as the longest night of the year approached, folks went into the woods and hauled home the biggest log they could find. The lighting of that log marked the beginning of Yule, a 12 day festival during which that great big Yule log had to keep burning, so as to coax the sun back and begin another 12 month cycle: of the waxing and the waning of the days, and the growth and the harvest of the crops, and the enjoyment of the abundance with which the gods had graced the earth.

There were many such customs and rituals and beliefs across the northern latitudes that marked the Winter Solstice. And as Christianity reached the peoples who populated these regions, an interesting synthesis took place.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Before we say more about these customs and how they became associated with the birth of the Christ, we need to be clear about several things.

First of all, no one knows when Jesus was born. There is no date in the Bible, no birth certificate in some ancient archive, no archeological evidence. It could’ve been December 25. Or it could’ve been some other date. We just don’t know.

What we do know is that long before Jesus’ birth, many cultures had these traditions and rituals and festivities around the Winter Solstice: the longest night of the year, when the orbit of the earth starts to bring the sun’s light back into a closer alignment with the northern hemisphere, and the days become longer, and with that lengthening of days comes the promise of warmer weather and the return of spring.

That’s a big deal if you’re a subsistence farmer without central heating! We can understand something of their fear as the darkness and the cold closed in; and something of their hope and joy as the light and the warmth returned. No wonder they developed customs and rituals to mark this time of year and celebrate the return of the sun.

Well, the early Christian missionaries, who made their way north from the Mediterranean and into those northern latitudes, they weren’t dummies. It’s been said that Christianity spread so quickly because the early Church out-thought the opposition. As Jesus said, “Love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength and *mind*” (Mark 12:30). Those early missionaries took that very seriously. They saw the hold that these Winter Solstice traditions had upon the pagan tribes of north-central and northwest Europe and with their sharp minds they said, “We’ve got an evangelistic opportunity here.” They said, “We can turn these winter solstice festivities into a great big birthday party for Jesus. Since we don’t have a date anyway, let’s pick one that will help us spread the Gospel.” So the days around the Winter Solstice became the time to observe the birth of Jesus. To the tribes that populated these regions of Europe the missionaries said, “Hey, you can believe in Jesus and still keep your festivities. Just remember that you’re no longer celebrating the rebirth of the sun: S-U-N; now you’re celebrating the birth of the Son: S-O-N. It works about as well in German as it does in English. So the 12 days of Yule became the 12 days of Christmas. And the lighting of candles and bonfires became a way of celebrating the Light of Christ which had come into the world. And the evergreen boughs that people brought into their homes as a sign of life in the dead of winter became a sign of the eternal life which God has offered the whole world in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It was a brilliant move, this melding of the birth of Jesus with these well-loved traditions. But it was also something of a Faustian bargain. It helped to convert people to Christianity, but it also opened-up the possibility that Christianity might be corrupted by pagan practices. When we wonder how Santa Claus became the central symbol of a celebration that’s supposed to be about Jesus, we continue to pay the price for this Faustian bargain, right down to the present day.

I’d like to share with your briefly some of these old traditions, and then reflect a bit about what we can still learn from them as we continue to rejoice in the Light of Christ which has once again come into the world.

In some regions the 12 days of Yule ran from December 20 through the night of December 31. In addition to the tradition of lighting the Yule log, there was a tradition of bands of merrymakers going from home to home and singing. Sometimes they were greeted with the offer of a warm drink called wassail, which was loaded with spices…and alcohol. As the night and the drinking continued, the singing got worse and the revelers sometimes turned to pulling pranks on the homes that they visited. By the end of the evening what began as good-hearted singing and festive frivolity deteriorated into rowdy carousing. Today, of course, the singing portion of this tradition remains as caroling, or wassailing.

Drinking, in fact, was a deeply-ingrained Yule tradition. Wassail and ale and all manner of strong drink were consumed in toast to the gods, to the king, to the lord of the manor, and to anyone else who gave you an excuse to have another drink. On the Twelfth Night – or December 31 – the drinking and the carousing reached their height. Of course, we now mark this night as New Year’s Eve, with the same old revelry. It’s been noted that the Church “changed the date [of Twelfth Night] to January 6 in hopes of doing away with the Pagan revels of the night, but this ploy obviously failed.”

In fact, by the 17th century, the 12 Days of Christmas had become such a drunken mess that when the Puritans came to power in England, they outlawed the whole thing. It seems that in the melding of pagan tradition and Christian interpretation, the pagan side too often won out. And it took the better part of 200 years for the joy of Christmas to reassert itself.

Not so in central Europe, where strict Calvinists like the Puritans never obtained political power and more easy-going Catholic and Lutheran norms prevailed. Here the lighting of candles and the decorating of the house with evergreens remained, and Christmas Eve especially became the height of the celebration. No one knows when evergreen boughs became a full tree – the story of Martin Luther bringing a tree into the house is almost certainly fictitious – but the tradition of setting-up an evergreen tree inside the house and decorating it with candles is certainly a German tradition. It was brought to England by Prince Albert, the German husband of Queen Victoria, in the middle of the 19th century, and I think it lives on to this day not because of any theological meaning with which the Church has sought to baptize it, but simply because it’s so pretty, and it touches something wonderful deep, within us; it’s beauty touches something of the sacred within us.

Add to Yule logs and carousing – I mean, caroling – and Christmas trees; add to these the tradition of telling…ghost stories. It’s an old Irish tradition – who knew? – this tradition of telling ghost stories on Christmas Eve. Folks gather that night to dance and sing and play the fiddle and make music together; and then, as the evening begins to wind down, the ghost stories start. Because, you see, the tradition that we associate with Halloween is also rooted in the Winter Solstice, when the Irish believed that those no longer living in this world could return and move about the earth once again. This tradition, in turn, may’ve influenced Charles Dickens and his decision to place 3 ghosts at the center of his famous *Christmas Carol*, published just before Christmas of 1843; the 3 ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future who visit Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve and transform this selfish and unhappy old man into a paragon of generosity and joy.

That tradition of telling ghost stories underscores the notion that we find in pagan and Christian traditions alike: that the time around the Winter Solstice – the time around the traditional birthday of Jesus – is a thin place, where the line between time and eternity is so very permeable and wondrous things can occur: like the souls of the dearly departed drawing near, and selfish old men being redeemed; like estranged friends being reconciled, and the eternal Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

It is especially in the darkness, on these long nights surrounding the coming of the Christ into our midst, that I’m touched by the wonder and the mystery and the joy of life. And that’s what these old traditions are all about, each in its own way. Joy, of course; the return of sun light and the birth of God’s Son are both good reason to kick back and celebrate; something that the Puritans didn’t quite understand. And mystery; which I’m not even going to try to explain, because if you can explain it, then it isn’t a mystery. But especially this year I was touched by that sense that the empty places around the Christmas dinner table weren’t really empty, and that my parents and grandparents and all those whom I’ve acutely missed in Christmases past where somehow very near; because in Christ the dead shall be raised and all shall be joined together in a community that transcends time and space. How this can be is indeed a mystery, and it brings comfort and joy and wonder.

No wonder that people across the cultures and the ages have been moved at this time of year to, in the words of the Psalmist:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody.

With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Such rejoicing brings a lightness to the soul and warmth to the heart. It’s what Charles Dickens and all of the best Christmas ghost story tellers sought to nurture. As the literary critic William Deans Howells wrote some 150 years ago:

“It was well once a year…to remind men by parable of the old, simple truths; to teach them that forgiveness, and charity, and the endeavor for [a] life better and purer than each has lived, are the principles upon which alone the world holds together and [goes] forward. It was well for the comfortable and the refined to be put in mind of the savagery and suffering all round them, and to be taught, as Dickens was always teaching, that certain feelings which grace human nature, as tenderness for the sick and helpless, self-sacrifice and generosity…are the common heritage of the race, the direct gift of Heaven, shared equally by the rich and poor.”

So Helen and I continue to mark this thin place, so full of wonder and mystery and joy, all the way through what the Church has identified as the 12 – or maybe even 13 – days of Christmas. And then, on the night of January 6, we have a ritual of sitting in the living room with the house lights off and the tree lights on one last time, and we reflect on what the Advent and Christmas seasons have been like this year. And then we turn the tree lights off, and Christmas is over for another year. Except that we try to heed Dickens’ advice and keep the Christmas well throughout the coming year. When we – all of us – do so through word and deed and prayer, our lives proclaim the good news and make the joyful noise, prophesied by the psalmist and announced by angels, that Jesus Christ is born. Amen!