

A CHRISTMAS HOMILY:

Each year, as we head into December, we watch the sun sink ever lower in the sky. Even at noon, the sun is barely above our housetops, nor does it lose any time in making a swift retreat toward the horizon. Under such conditions, the earth has no way of gaining back the warmth it loses every night. Each passing day seems shorter and colder, and we feel a shudder of dread as winter descends upon the world.

That is the way it appears to us. But among primitive peoples, it must have seemed far worse. Knowing nothing of astronomy, they were deeply afraid that the sun would continue to sink lower and lower until it vanished altogether. (And indeed, in the northern latitudes, it does precisely that.) The fear was that all light and warmth would depart with the sun, never to return.

And so, the primitive peoples would build bonfires on the hilltops to strengthen the faltering sun in its course. They would also display a multitude of lights, both outside and inside their homes, to compensate for the absence of light from above. For such peoples, what we regard as the onset of winter would have seemed more like the approaching extinction of all life on this earth.

But suddenly, there was a miracle. On or about December 21, the sun stood still, then reversed its course. Slowly thereafter, the days grew longer. Even though three months of winter lay ahead, there was now the confidence that eventually daylight would triumph over night, and winter would give way to spring.

Thus it was common among ancient peoples in the Northern Hemisphere to hold some sort of celebration shortly after the winter solstice. In Rome it was called the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun,” or Sol Invictus, and it was attended by much merriment and rejoicing. Interestingly enough, the date of this celebration was December 25—the same date chosen by Christianity to observe the birth of Jesus. The Bible gave no precise date for his birth, but the Christian festivals, like the pagan festivals before them, became closely tied to the cycle of the sun.

They still are. And so, in the great Advent hymn, we hear:

Oh come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer,
Our spirits by thine advent here.
Disperse the gloomy shades of night,
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.

And a text from the prophet Isaiah, frequently quoted at Christmastime, strikingly joins the two major themes of this season: the return of the light and the birth of the wondrous child. We all know the passage:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, and they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.....

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder. And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

The Christmas Story is felt to be the fulfillment of such prophecies. To a world lost in darkness and submerged in iniquity, there appears a wondrous child, born in obscurity but destined to bring new Life and Light to the human race. The way has been prepared for him by a long line of prophets, including the aforementioned Isaiah, who anticipated his message and forecast his coming. He is born among a people who are awaiting him. And a crucial role is played by the young woman who agrees to bear him, under the most extraordinary circumstances. When asked to accept this monumental assignment, she does not waiver. Instead, she says to the messenger: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word." Upon her cooperation the unfolding of the whole drama depends.

The legends surrounding Christmas are filled with miraculous, even preposterous imagery. There is the Virgin Birth; there is the chorus of angels. Among the prophecies that are read at this time of year, we hear the following:

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low. And the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

And here is another:

Drop down your dew, ye heavens from above. Let the earth be opened up and bud forth a savior. The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.

I myself would not such words literally, but there may be a point to them anyhow. Perhaps these outrageous predictions are meant to shock us into believing that change is actually possible.

In both the drama of the solstice and the story of Christmas, the New Beginning is something quite small: a slight change in the length of the day, or the birth of a tiny child in obscure surroundings. Yet from these modest beginnings, great things eventually come. But if such beginnings are to be fruitful, the way must be prepared for them, and we must cooperate with them when they arrive. The seed must fall into fertile soil.

Jesus' birth was followed by many trials, and the solstice is followed by three months of winter. The New Life, when it appears, is always tested. So there must be a willingness to persevere; but great rewards await those who do.

In this cynical age, we may think that everything is fixed, that no extraordinary change is possible, and that people—ourselves included—will continue to be as they always have been. But nothing is really set in stone, nothing stays the same forever, and at times a whole New Life may open up for us. No one can say with certainty just how or when this may happen. But we should not, for that reason, rule it out. In the meantime, as we wait, we can at least begin to amend our behavior, where that is needed, and prepare ourselves to receive whatever opportunities may be granted. Despite the darkness of the December sky, and the difficulties of our own situation, we could be surprised at what our efforts might eventually accomplish.

Presented by Eric Saunders at the Christmas Eve Service, 2006