

## Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?

Meeting Notes of 20 December 2010

Poem: "The Shortest Day" by Susan Cooper

So the shortest day came, and the year died,  
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world  
Came people singing, dancing,  
To drive the dark away.  
They lighted candles in the winter trees;  
They hung their homes with evergreen; They burned beseeching fires all night long To keep the year alive,  
And when the New Year's sunshine blazed awake  
They shouted, reveling.  
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them  
Echoing behind us - Listen!!  
All the long echoes sing the same delight, This shortest day,  
As promise wakens in the sleeping land: They carol, fest, give thanks,  
And dearly love their friends, And hope for peace.  
And so do we, here, now, This year and every year.  
Welcome Yule!!

Reading

In our present time, in the Western world, Christmas is a major celebration of hopes and dreams, freed from the necessity of rational examination. Christmas incorporates ancient and fundamental human concerns that have been expressed in virtually all cultures in all times, concerns that have been organized around the winter solstice and the universal myth of the birth of the saving hero. This morning we draw from these myths and metaphors to help us remember and to feel our emotional and imagining selves and the fundamental sameness of all humanity.  
Reading: Earl W. Count, 4,000 Years of Christmas:

"Shall we liken Christmas to the web in a loom? There are many weavers, who work into the pattern the experience of their lives. When one generation goes, another comes to take up the weft where it has been dropped. The pattern changes as the mind changes, yet never begins quite anew. At first, we are not sure that we discern the pattern, but at last we see that, unknown to the weavers themselves, something has taken shape before our eyes, and that they have made something very beautiful, something that compels our understanding. "From the winter solstice traditions, we weave in the contemplation of change: endings and new beginnings; loss and gain; death and new life; the old man of last year and the baby of the new year; winter holding the now waxing sun's promise of spring to follow. The new baby, of Christmas and of the New Year, expresses our hope for a better future; our love and care for the generations that follow ours; our wish to give something of value to the world."

Reading: "The Roots of Christianity," by Jeanne Schramm

Many centuries ago in a country to the east of the Mediterranean Sea, a child was born who would one day found a new religion. He had no earthly father for he was conceived by God and born of a virgin. His birth had been foretold hundreds of years before and a brilliant, divine light glowed in the heavens above the spot where he was born. A local ruler, warned that this child might someday become a threat, attempted to have him slain but he did not succeed.

Little is known of the child's youth but there were indications that he was wise beyond his years and that he impressed teachers and philosophers alike with his youthful wisdom.

At about the age of 30 he began a public ministry. There are reports he cast out demons, cured the blind and performed numerous unexplained miracles. He was called "shepherd." On several occasions he was tempted by the devil (in the wilderness) but he overcame the temptations.

The message of his ministry was that there was one God - one all-knowing, all-seeing, loving, father-type God who rewards the good and punishes the evil. He taught that death was not the end of life. At the time of death, the good go to heaven to be with God; the

evil go to hell to be with the devil.

He taught that at the end of the ages, there will be a general bodily resurrection and a final day of judgment. At this time the impure souls will be thrust into hell for eternal torment. His followers felt that he was the key to salvation and this eternal torture could be avoided for those who followed and believed in him.

Of his many teachings, one in particular has withstood the test of time and may be recognized today as a Golden Rule: "Whatsoever you do not approve for yourself, do not approve for anyone else." Who was this man with a life and a message which sounds so familiar to all of us? His name was Zoroaster and he lived and preached in Persia six centuries before the birth of Christ.

Sermon "Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?" loosely adapted from Frederic J. Muir

"The Christmas story, whatever it lacks from the viewpoint of history, is true to human nature." -- Clinton Lee Scott  
Would Jesus celebrate Christmas? Would he observe his birthday? Let's see.

What we would eventually recognize as the Christ story was only one of many similar stories that were abundant in Jesus' days. Jean Schramm's description of the birth, life and worship of Zoroaster - who lived six centuries before Jesus - is a perfect example of this. Zoroastrian followers were still active in Jesus' day. And this is just the beginning of the religious potpourri:

The time that finally became the birthday of Jesus also happened to be the birth time of Hercules, who was born of a virgin; of Krishna, the incarnate Hindu god who was born of a virgin mother in a cave while shepherds watched their flocks and his parents fled a wicked king; the birthday of Bacchus, or Dionysus, who was born of a virgin and Zeus; the birthday of Tammuz, the god of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, who was born of a virgin and Attis, the Phrygian sun god. (Peter Samson) Jesus' homeland was Roman territory, it was an agrarian society, and versions of Roman pagan-nature observances and beliefs permeated almost everything. Topping the list was Saturnalia, which many say is the historical Christmas. Saturnalia was a week-long bash of merry-making, sex and drunkenness, all to celebrate the birthday of the Sun, actually the so-called "return" of the sun. The seven days of Saturnalia saw gift-giving and equality among all people, and finally culminated on the 25th of December, the day Romans believed was the shortest of the year. All of this, then, is what filled the lives of Jews around the time of

Jesus' birth. It's what Jesus would have been born into.

Would Jesus celebrate Christmas? Historically, the simple answer is no because Jews considered birthdays heathen recognitions and not part of Jewish practice. But living in such a multi-cultural, diverse, religiously and politically explosive setting, Jesus must have been aware of his birthday and if only in his mind, paused to note it.

We really have no idea when Jesus was born. With no clues to be found in the Gospel narratives, early church fathers of the 3rd century placed his birth on May 20 and others on April 19 or 20. Clement, Bishop of Alexandria (died c. 215), nominated November Hippolytus (died c. 236) calculated that Christ must have been born on Wednesday, the same day God created the sun. [Another church leader] posited that the first day of creation coincided with the first day of spring, on March 25, and contended that Jesus' birthday fell three days later, on March 28. (Peter Samson)

All of these dates and any other ones are merely speculative, someone's best guess. What we do know, and it is quite clear, is that in the years after Jesus' death his followers had absolutely no interest in knowing his birth date because they anticipated the end of the world and Jesus' return. Why should they bother with a birth date when they believed he'd never die? But we also know that as the years peeled away, the Second Coming didn't happen and the end of the world didn't come, so early theologians like Paul had to create new reasons for staying loyal to the faith. It was then that learning more about the nativity grew important. But it was too late—no one remembered the month or day. Sometime in the early years of the fourth century, Christianity had grown enough and felt secure enough to challenge all the other cultural and religious traditions that filled the times, many of them the same observances that had filled the life and mind of Jesus. In one of the most astute moves ever, one that would characterize Christianity's growth until today, their leaders chose to appropriate popular, on-going holidays and piggy-backed on them. And that's the way December 25th was chosen. Having no idea when Jesus was born, the early church selected the last day of Saturnalia as fitting for their observance. In this way, they could then indirectly challenge Roman authority and paganism, but also who was celebrating what event became confusing thus creating the illusion that there might be far more Christians than anyone realized. The scales were

finally tipped in the middle of the 4th century when Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and in a symbolic act of conversion and loyalty he built the Vatican atop the hill where sun worshippers likely gathered. The gospel biographies - all of them - are wrong as history: they are make-believe stories, stories created and told for particular audiences. This is why no two of the stories are the same and why it's impossible that they are parts of the same story. For example, both the Matthew and Luke narratives, the ones always used, are full of references to Hebrew scripture that all Jews would have recognized and valued. And why did they include these? Because they were trying to persuade Jewish audiences that Jesus was the Messiah, the new David, the King of Kings. And so they pulled out every sacred scriptural story and reference that they knew their audience would be familiar with, stories and references that would "prove" Jesus was the Son of God. Those birth narratives were not written for us, they are not descriptive of "His Birthday," they are as fictional as any of the other ancient myths.

But they are great stories, as historically flawed as they might be. And when coupled with the Germanic Yuletide winter solstice mythology that is part of the secular world, the result is a December 25th that would be unrecognizable to Jesus, his followers or any of the early Christians of the first century.

There is a poem that captures how Jesus might react to all of "His Birthday" goings-on. The poet is Lawrence Ferlinghetti:

Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and ran away to where there were not rootless  
Christmas trees hung with candy canes and breakable stars

Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and ran away to where there were no gilded Christmas  
trees and no tinsel Christmas trees and no tinfoil Christmas trees and no pink plastic Christmas trees and  
no gold Christmas trees and no black Christmas trees and no powder blue Christmas trees hung with  
electric candles and encircled by tin electric trains and clever cornball relatives

Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and ran away to where no intrepid Bible salesmen  
covered the territory in two-tone Cadillacs and where no Sears Roebuck crèches complete with plastic  
babe in manger arrived by parcel post the babe by special delivery and where no televised Wise Men  
praised the Lord Calvert Whiskey

Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and ran away to where no handshaking stranger in a red  
flannel suit and fake white beard went around passing himself off as some sort of North Pole saint  
crossing the desert to Bethlehem Pennsylvania in a Volkswagen sled drawn by rollicking Adirondack  
reindeer with German names and bearing sacks of Humble Gifts from Saks Fifth Avenue for everybody's  
imagined Christ child

Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and ran away to where no Bing Crosby carolers groaned  
of a tight Christmas and where no Radio City angles ice skated wingless thru a winter wonderland into a  
jingle bell heaven daily at 8:30 with Midnight Mass matinees

Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and softly stole away into some anonymous Mary's  
womb again where in the darkest night of everybody's anonymous soul He awaits again an unimaginable  
and impossibly Immaculate Re-conception, the very craziest of Second Comings

Ferlinghetti is telling us to set aside as nice and even fun the secular and sacred stories from culture, family and church -transcend them by discovering that Christ climbed down and entered the souls of each of us, and there he waits for a re- conception, another opportunity to share his gospel. He's suggesting that Jesus the person is not that important - don't make the messenger the message. But the message that Jesus taught is what's in our souls, that's what climbed down from the cross, that's what the Christmas story is all about.

Jesus' message announced the arrival of a new stage of morality in human history, and in human consciousness. In the 500 years leading up to Jesus, a period now called the Axial Age, this arrival, this birth, of a new stage of morality on earth had been prepared for by Zoroaster with his message of devotion to truth; by Confucius, with his message of devotion to family and, by extension, devotion to one's society; by Lao Tzu the founder of Taoism, with his message of living with simplicity and humility; by Buddha, with his message of living in the "right" way—leading to wisdom, ethical conduct, and awareness of the true nature of one's consciousness; by Plato, with his message that love is the way to the highest good. All of these moral prophets—moral geniuses for their day--were an advance beyond the morality of the previous age, that of the ancient Greek poet, Homer, who lived in the 800s BCE, whose morality included loyalty to friends, but was primarily the morality of the warrior, in which might

makes right and justice is based on the concept of eye-for-an-eye retribution. The teachings attributed to Jesus, building on his Axial Age predecessors, say that we should love others as we do ourselves, and that morality should be based on compassion and forgiveness, not retribution. Though Jesus was Jewish, his message was not that of Moses; it was not a command to blindly obey a powerful, ambitious, and vengeful God. Jesus' message was closer to Plato's; a command to be, in all actions, guided by Love as the highest Good. Jesus taught that everyone, regardless of tribe, of sin, or of station in life, is equally worthy of respect and care: a new idea in the world.

This new moral standard redefined moral excellence for the next 2000-plus years, right up to now. It is a standard that humankind has yet to reach in all but a few exceptional individuals. But, like a lighthouse beacon, it is a moral standard that we use to guide our ultimate sense of what "should" be. And it is a standard that has influenced world history and politics ever since ancient Rome.

The new moral beacon, still being young, is relatively weak; liable to being obscured by many competing interests. This, partly, is why hundreds of millions of people around the world go to church: to recharge that beacon for the coming week.

Ultimately, Christmas is the celebration of this birth of what is currently humans' highest stage of moral development, of our concept of the nature of the Good. Christmas is about the hope that with each new year, and with each new generation, we will be better able to enact this 11th--and highest--commandment of universal love. While the biblical narratives are story, fine fiction, the hopes, disappointments, dreams and disillusionments that they speak about are very real, they are as real as life is real. They speak to the hearts and spirit of all people. This is why they are so appealing - they strike chords that resonate throughout the ages, beyond time, ethnicity, gender, and culture. As Joseph Campbell has documented, every culture has some type of myth of the hero, who suffers to learn the real meaning of life and then brings it to his people giving them new hope for a better existence. In the quiet of reflection about the Christmas season, "at the heart of the silence," if you have the ear to hear and heart to feel, you too will be able to know Emmanuel – the Spirit within you. If this is what the Christmas season is about, if finding Emmanuel within yourself and each other is what "His Birthday" means, then yes, Jesus would celebrate Christmas.

Let Christmas be a time to remember and celebrate the prophetic teachings and parables attributed to Jesus. What better way to celebrate his birth and life than to re-conceive his message for our times? Amen.  
A Christmas Interpretation Set to Music: "Better Days" by The Goo Goo Dolls

Benediction by Bettye A Doty

We go our separate ways now, taking with us this moment of transcendence and the warmth of a caring community. Let these moments and this warmth walk with us throughout the days ahead and bless whomever we meet.