

Preparation for Session S69 – Welcome the Return of the Light

Some years it seems that the holidays are more synonymous with stress than with celebration. For the last Small Group Ministries session of 2002, we invite you to pause amidst busy holiday preparations and purchases to contemplate the most basic of our needs and wants—warmth and light. In this session, we celebrate the Winter Solstice in a simple ritual with your Small Group sisters and brothers.

Preparation consists of only two things: read the history and perspective in this Preparation, and bring a candle and holder to the session. The preferred color is green, but it doesn't really matter.

The Small Group Ministries Council and Content Team want to extend our heartfelt thanks for your participation and support this past year. Peace be with you and yours!

Yule

By Phaedra Oorbeck, [The CUUPS Newsletter](#), Winter 1996

December 20-23 (exact date determined by the position of the sun)

Other Names: Winter Solstice, Midwinter

Sun enters Capricorn

Mid-point of Celtic winter

Shortest day and longest night of the solar year

Imagine yourself centuries ago in a climate zone not so different from that of Europe. The harvest is long over; the winter is upon you. The air is turning colder and colder, the days shorter and shorter, and the nights longer and longer. It will be many months before fresh shoots come forth from the earth again. You are dependent upon what food stocks you have stored from the fertile time of the year, and upon which animals you can spare to be slaughtered. With luck, you have enough fuel or fat to provide light for some part of the long night. Travel, never good, is now worse than ever. You stay in your home, try to keep warm, and wait for the sun to return.

Winter Solstice is the longest night in that long winter but it carries the promise of Spring. From that night on, the days will become longer until warmth and fertility return to the Earth. The pivotal night is celebrated with feasting, music, dance, and festivity of all sorts. Holly, fir, and other evergreens, symbols of life eternal because they stay green through the winter, are brought into the house. Families and friends brave traveling to celebrate together. You might search for a Yule log, the largest log your hearth can accommodate, and let it burn for as many days as it can. You might choose an animal to be slaughtered, providing a fat-rich, high-caloric respite from stored cabbages and turnips. For the weaker members of your household such a rich feast might make the difference in their chances of survival through the cold months ahead. Bonfires, hearth fires, candles, and lamps of all sort blaze forth in the long night to mark the triumph of light over darkness.

If this sounds like our popular Christmas holiday celebrations, it is no accident. The Puritans, among others, frowned on celebrating Christmas even to the point of legislating against it. It was clear to them that most of the traditions associated with it had very little, if anything, to do with the birth of a Rabbi in the Middle East. These traditions were relics of our European Pagan past...

Even the date of Christmas is an echo of Europe's Pagan past. Primary-source Christian texts do not give us a date for the birth of Jesus...it was unlikely to have been mid-winter; shepherds in the Middle East do not "watch their flocks by night" in December! But December 25 was celebrated in the Roman Empire as the Birth of the Invincible Sun, who was Mithras, a solar Deity popular with the Roman legions. (Note the date falls a few days after the exact solstice. In some cultures, the "power" dates are not on, but several days after an astronomical event.) Many Christian churches, including part of the Vatican, were erected on the sites of Mithraic temples. Romans also celebrated Saturnalia, a holiday of feasting and excess, over the dates of what we call Christmas and New Year. When the Church decided, several centuries later, to set an

official date on which to observe the Nativity of Jesus, December 25 was deliberately chosen in an effort to capitalize on the people's custom of already celebrating it. The Church fathers hoped that the populace would accept the same festivities with a different Deity named; and so it has evolved.

Modern observances of Winter Solstice often focus on the metaphor of light returning. Rituals often begin solemnly with darkness then become bright and festive. For our inner selves we can remember that however dark things seem the sun always comes back, even from the longest, darkest night.

Winter Solstice is determined astronomically by the position of the sun. Any good almanac, calendar, or daily newspaper can provide you with the exact date, which will vary from December 20 to 25. (*Note: This year, the Solstice will be Sunday, December 22.*) Solstice is best observed after sunset. Midnight is also a very appropriate time, if you can manage it, or at dawn, to greet the sun on its return.

(CUUPS is the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. Special thanks to Jo Balzer for providing the materials for this session.)

Additional Thoughts from Rev. Stan Stefancic, [UU Church of Tucson](#), Arizona, 12/97

The December Holiday Season, with its multitude of customs and mythologies, is a marvelous amalgam of Western folk and religious customs. Lighting fires and bringing winter greenery indoors in order to persuade the sun to return with its warmth had their origin in the ancient Roman Festival of Saturn (the Sun). The story of the birth of Jesus was combined with the Roman legends and celebration of the Winter Solstice, as a result of the fact that the Roman Christian Church tried to stop Solstice celebrations, but could not.

Northern Europeans had celebrated December Festivals in honor of the Sun God with dancing, feasting, gift giving and religious rites. The Scandinavians called it the time of Yule. The Christmas tree had its origin in the Druid worship of oak and mistletoe. The Dutch brought the tradition of the Christmas tree and the veneration of Saint Nicholas to Manhattan Island in the 17th century. Saint Nicholas was transformed into Santa Clause by Unitarian Clement Moore (*Twas the night before Christmas...*) and cartoonist Thomas Nast during the 19th century.

What has become known as the "December Holiday Season" is rich and varied in its traditions and mythologies. This Holiday Season belongs to everyone because it contains elements of every imaginable religion and practice. Its mythology is universal.

Christmas occurs during dark December, around the time of Winter Solstice, when the days become shorter and darker and the nights become longer and colder. It is the time when we decorate and enliven our homes with festive colors. We string bright colored lights to lighten the burden of darkness. We bring green trees indoors to remind ourselves of spring warmth and rebirth. We send messages of care and love to far away friends and loved ones and we reassure those near us of our love through word and gift giving. We brighten the dark December days, a habit which is deep in our human needs.

Some of us were raised with the Jewish tradition of Hanukkah which involves eight days of celebration, prayer, and gift giving. It is a festival of freedom.

Celebrations and significant holidays evolve. A new celebration is that of Kwanza, a seven day celebration which starts the day after Christmas. It is celebrated by many African Americans with the emphasis on family and community.

December is a time of hope and expectation. It is filled with profound meaning. We should not allow the meanings of the season to slip through the net of our needs and desires. Each December we reaffirm the hope and faith that light and sunshine will return and that the power of light and generosity will be victorious over darkness and selfishness.