



Story

Once upon a time there was a small fir tree that lived deep in the forest. He loved his forest. It was all he had ever known and so he was satisfied.

Each winter, families would travel into the forest on a sleigh and cut several of the trees and take them away. There would be much laughter and festivity. The small fir tree wondered what happened to the trees and asked the majestic ancient firs who had seen much more than him.

"Ohhhhhhhh," they said. "That is a very special thing called Christmas. Our trees are taken to a wondrous place called home and put in a special room. They are covered with decorations and topped with a beautiful star. Presents are heaped at their feet. They are surrounded by love and adoration. It is a wonderful thing."

The fir tree knew then that this is what he wanted to be. Everything he did focused on attaining his dream. Every drop of rain, every ray of sunshine became part of his path towards his destiny. Each year when the families came to the woods he would say, "Please choose me!" until one year, the sleigh stopped before him.

A man lept from the sleigh and with a great blow brought his axe to the fir tree's trunk. It was the greatest pain the fir tree had felt in his entire life. The axe continued to strike until the tree was severed from its root. It was then placed onto the sleigh and with much laughter and singing the sleigh left the forest. The tree remembered vaguely that they were going somewhere important, somewhere beautiful and wondrous, somewhere he had wished to see all the days and years of his life past.

When they arrived at the house the tree was taken in and its sore trunk placed in soothing water. It was placed in the special room, and covered with decorations and a beautiful star on its crown. The tree rejoiced, spreading its branches as far as it could and sending forth as much love as it could. After all, its dream had come true. That night, presents were heaped at its base, and the next morning, the presents were opened. Again, the tree was elated. So much love, so much festivity, so much beauty and joy. What a life this was going to be.

And then, one day, all the ornaments and lights were taken off. The same man grabbed him by the branches and dragged him to the attic where he lay alone, in the cold and dark. Two mice came to sit in his branches. "What is this?" asked the tree. "What have I done that I should be abandoned like this?"

They said to him, "Dear tree, all things, even good things, come to an end. And now a different time begins. A new life, for a different kind of life always follows the old."

Some weeks later, the man came back and dragged the tree outside. The tree felt a great sense of fear and excitement. Was he being taken back to that special room? But alas, the man took the tree to the woodshed and chopped away all his branches. The tree thought it would die from the pain. Soon he was in pieces on the floor beside a roaring fire. He looked around and saw all the faces of

those who had laughed and sung around him just weeks before. It was good to feel their love. The man rose and put one of his pieces into the fire.

At first the fir tree resisted, frightful of the flames, but soon he understood, as the flame burned more deeply into his core. He had not known he could burn so brightly and fill a room with such warmth. Night after night the fir tree surrendered himself joyfully to the flames until there was no more left of him but ashes.

Then those who had gathered round his heat swept his ashes into a bucket and in the spring his ashes were spread through the fields. The rains came, and the sun, and the ashes of the fir tree felt a quickening. Below and through and ashes came tiny bright green shoots, and the fir tree smiled a thousand smiles and sighed a thousand sighs. "I have fallen to ashes and yet now bring forth new life again. Of all that rises and falls and rises again, it is love of new life, and love of that alone, that lasts and lasts. I am everywhere now."

Reading

A Solstice Reflection, Steven Shick

Solstice celebrations capture the moment when the darkness gives way to light. For thousands of years, people have tried to hold onto that moment of joy and certainty.

Five thousand years ago at Newgrange, in Ireland, people built a circular structure that let a shaft of light travel deep into a central chamber at the dawning of the winter solstice. We can imagine how the anxiety caused by the approaching darkness was relieved when the light was seen making its journey down the shaft. Then, observers could predict their future with confidence.

Constructing shafts for the light to penetrate deeply into the central chamber of our hearts is an effort that must take place in a time of waiting and uncertainty. It is a time when adjustments need to be made. Christians call it Advent, a time to prepare for the arrival of the Son, the light of the world.

So much of what we do in life depends on how we respond to this waiting moment. Such a time can be met with confidence and anticipation or anxiety and despair; confidence that the light will be seen again, or anxiety that it may never return.

What can we do in this waiting moment?

Practice imagining the dawning shaft of light as it makes its way into your own heart. To direct this light requires us to, as Dag Hammarskjold suggests, "vanish as an end and remain purely as a means." No small task. But if you doubt its effectiveness, think of those who have made a difference in your life and what they have selflessly given you. Or think of the man whose life we celebrate at Christmas. Jesus, it is clear, vanished as an "end" and lived only as a "means."

Join with others. No solitary individual assembled at Newgrange. People gathered together to build a chamber where the light could be reflected in others' eyes. Waiting is not the same as being passive. Living in this dark time requires active waiting.

The only question is: Will we, in this waiting time, build a chamber where the light can be reflected widely enough so that others can see its beauty?

Sermon

One of the questions we ask our children, from a very young age, is, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and we revel in their answers, whether they want to be an astronaut, a doctor, an actor, or the President of the United States. And although we know that their answer may be different every time we ask them, we praise them for their ambition and tell them to work hard and they may just attain their dream. What we don’t tell them, and really can’t tell them, is how many twists and turns will fill their journey, and that it will be a journey of both joy and despair. They may get where they want to go and find it is nothing like they imagined. They may discover that beneath the appearance of their dream is a lot of hard work they are not prepared for. They may not be prepared for what their dreams will cost them. And how can they until the moment comes upon them? How could the fir trees in the forest have any idea what it meant to become a Christmas Tree? How could they see anything but the laughter and gaiety?

And yet, there we stand, encouraging our children to dream, praising them for their lofty ambitions. “How wonderful!” we say. “You will be the best veterinarian. You will be the best hairstylist.” We continue to encourage them, realizing that wisdom comes through experience. We can’t prepare them for their disappointments. We can’t protect them from their mistakes. They won’t understand what is going to be asked of them until it happens, and maybe even then perhaps not! They have to experience this world for themselves and find their own way. Somehow, we trust that they will do that, find their way, as we still are and probably will to the day we die.

We are approaching Solstice, the day with the least hours of sunlight and the most hours of darkness. The word "Solstice" is derived from two Latin words: "sol" meaning sun, and "sistere," to cause to stand still. In earth centered religious traditions, this is a holy day where you journey into the heart of the darkness and into a time of waiting, and then rejoice in the return of the sun. Earth centered traditions are unique, I think, among the world’s religions, because they truly make a sacred thing out of darkness, not only physical darkness but spiritual and emotional darkness. And by saying that, I don’t mean darkness as in evil or wickedness or sinfulness. I mean darkness in terms of those places of the soul that are more somber and contemplative. So many religions focus on turning us towards the highest and loftiest aspects of the sacred or of the human condition. God is often presented as a God of transcendence and purity. The gods and goddesses of the Earth Centered traditions are often much more modest and earthy. They reflect the many faces of humanity, which also includes despair, sadness, and emptiness. Solstice, then, is an opportunity for a willful intentional descent into the somber places of the human psyche.

In earth centered traditions we are not called to battle with or to subjugate or exorcise those parts of ourselves that we would see as dark. Rather we should befriend them, just as the mice advised the fir tree to settle into its life in the attic. There are pieces of each of us that also need to sit in the attic. They are part of us and we need them to be whole. So as the sun retreats from the face of the earth, leaving it in darkness, we too honor that there are times for all of us when the light leaves our hearts and we are left to journey on a poorly lit path whose end we cannot know. Solstice assures us that there is sacredness, truth, and power in that descent.

I find it helpful to be reminded of that at this time of year, because in all the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, the truth is that for many people, this is a difficult time. Holidays often are. But Christmas can be especially difficult because so much of the focus of Christmas is so glowy. The music, the lights, the presents, the decorations. Also the expectations of what Christmas should be.

There is this Hallmark image of togetherness and good cheer, with a liberal sprinkling of snow and star dust and family cuddliness. It's not always possible to be in that kind of place. I know that there have been years I could fall into all that Christmas cheer and just soak it up. But other years it wasn't that easy. If there was family tension, sitting around the Christmas dinner table could be really hard. The first Christmas without a loved one who has died can certainly be a somber experience. Divorce and separation will radically change how the holidays are felt and experienced. Empty nesters will feel the reality that their children's lives have expanded to the point where their families of origin are no longer the center. If you have no family, Christmas will make you well aware of that fact. If this is a difficult time financially, Christmas, which is associated with generosity and abundance, can feel empty. And of course, simply coming together can reignite family dynamics that get a break when you're not in each other's space. Christmas can magnify both the empty and the complicated places that have come to be.

But there isn't much room in the glowy Christmas we celebrate it today for that experience, but there is room for it in Solstice. In fact, in Solstice, those feelings are not something that takes away from the holiday, but rather are part of it in an intimate way.

Imagine that you are at Newgrange. It is dark and cold. You are in a crowd of people, all of whom are as silent as the night around them. And then together, you enter the passageway and travel deep into a large central stone chamber, the womb of the earth. All you can hear is the breathing of people around you and the clambering of their shoes upon the stone floor. There you wait in the dark for the sun to come. And the point is not simply the sun that is coming, the point is that you are waiting, actively waiting, which is very different from passively waiting. When you passively wait you are completely dependent on fate, a victim of the changes of time. To actively wait means sitting in a pregnant emptiness cultivating your readiness for whatever may come. The sacredness, the specialness of Solstices, doesn't just start when the first ray of sun makes its way down the passageway. The sacredness is there from the beginning, in the often somber unknowing places of the heart.

Imagine if we lived in a society that didn't run from the darkness, that didn't try to shut it away, punish it, shame it, scapegoat it. So much of the pain and suffering we see in this country and around the world, the discrimination, the injustices, inequality and oppression, comes from ordinary daily decisions of human beings, minute by minute, to run from their inner darkness by projecting it outward onto others. Would that we could gather as a crowd to silently walk in reverence into the womb of the earth.

So if you are approaching the holidays with caution this year, if there is a heaviness in your heart or a quake in your step, think of the darkening days, think of the passageway into the heart of the chamber and know that you have taken your place in the crowd that walks into it. Think of the truths that are emerging in your complicated emptiness. And you are not alone. You are actually in a cloud of witnesses to its wisdom, truth and power. What will you do with this waiting moment?

When our children dream of their future, and we join with them in their dreaming, we know some of what is waiting for them. We can't exactly know their journey because the world changes and they will change. Our parents could never have predicted what would come into our lives. But, we do know that their childhood is a time of filling. They are soaking in the world and our responsibility is to help them get as full as possible, so that they have deep wells that can sustain them through the emptying times that are going to come. Right now in Children's Chapel they are dreaming about what they might want to be, writing those dreams on stars and hanging them from a Christmas tree. We are encouraging them to actively wait for what may come. We can model for them that they can dream to the stars, that they can survive the dreams that don't come true, and that

they can welcome the way their dreams shift and change according to unforeseen realities in the world and in themselves. We can model this by being like the fir tree. Who among us have not been severed from our roots, had our greenery stripped and seen ourselves in pieces on the floor. Every one of us, in our own way, has survived the flames of life. We have found new hope. What shoots of new life have come up and may still come up from your ashes?

When the shaft of light finally broke through the horizon and shimmered down the passageway and to the inner core of Newgrange, it was a time of celebration! Singing, chanting, dancing, eating, gift giving. All the songs the choir has sung today are about praising new life. The promise of the First Noel, which means “day of birth.” Angels we have heard on high! And Cantate Domino – which translates “Sing unto the Lord a new song; Sing unto the Lord, all the earth. Sing unto the Lord, bless His name; show forth His salvation from day to day.” These were magnificent songs of joy, sung in a very dark time.

Just as the ancients descended into darkness with the disappearing sun, the people of Israel were under the cruel thumb of an oppressive Roman Empire. It felt like they would never be free. Everywhere they turned was suffering and pain. Even the fact that Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem to pay their taxes was a function of Roman oppression. As they wandered Bethlehem in search of a place for her to give birth to her child, there was even no room at the inn. Would she give birth to the child in the cold dark streets? When I think of them being taken into a stable, I think of Newgrange, with its deep stone chamber, and the birth of the child as a ray of light shining down the passageway to the actively waiting crowd.

Earlier in this sermon I asked what it would be like if we lived in a society that didn’t run from its darkness, that didn’t shut it away, punish it, shame it, scapegoat it, that would gather as a crowd to silently walk into its reverence. The true power of Christmas is that the birth of a child shone like a light through the constant shaming that was life under the Roman Empire. The songs of praise that emerged, whether from shepherds and angels gathering around a newborn baby, or throngs that greeted the sun in the womb of an ancient stone chamber, cut through all that shame. The Roman Empire gained its strength through unimaginable cruelty and by pitting brother against brother, by teaching them to project their shame outward onto any available scapegoat. And that too, is how we separate from each other today. Running from shame, projecting it from our own hearts onto anything outside of us. If we cannot sit in the silence, if we cannot wait in the pregnant emptiness, this is what happens. We cannot then see the child in the manger, and we cannot welcome the ray of light streaming down the stone shaft. How will we open our eyes? How will we sit in this waiting moment? How will we welcome the child?

In a few moments we will be singing *O Come All Ye Faithful*, one of the most beloved carols of the season. I would encourage us to rethink this song. O Come All Ye Faithful, O come all of humanity, faithful to your joys and sorrows, hopes and despairs, come into Bethlehem, come into the heart of things, into the womb of the earth. Come and behold him, come and see the returning sun, born the King of Angels, born from the ashes spread in the forest and returning as a thousand faces of light. O Come Let Us Adore him. Amen.