

SOLSTICE: AT THE FIRST SIGN OF HOPE

A Sermon By
The Rev. Susan Manker-Seale

Winter. Here in the desert, we're lucky if it gets cold enough to wear a sweater for more than five days out of the entire season. I still have sweaters I bought twenty-three years ago because they never wear out.

But even if it doesn't get very cold, it does get darker. We see the sun's path sink lower and lower to the south as the weeks go by, until that long-awaited day around December 22, when it seems to stand still. That is the day we call Winter Solstice. "Sol" comes from Latin meaning "sun," and "sistere" meaning "stand still." This is the day the ancients marked with stone circles that fill us today with awe. This is the day they celebrated with rituals of fire that we still practice in modern forms within our homes and religious gatherings. Winter Solstice is a day that ties us to our heritage as human beings perhaps more than any other holy day in the history of humanity.

This period of the winter celebrations, which include Divali, Advent, Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas and Kwanzaa, is also called the Season of Light. It is a time when our experience of sign and symbol is awakened again. We haul a tree into our living rooms, put candles in our windows, light fires if we have fireplaces, hang lights on everything we can find, and dance around the bonfire to imitate the ancient winter rites that brought hope, in the real life-giving symbol of the sun, back into our lives.

All this because winter is not just the physical experience of dark and cold in our lives; it represents the dark and cold of our spiritual lives as well. St. John of the Cross, the Roman Catholic mystic of the sixteenth century, wrote a poem he entitled "The Dark Night of the Soul." This phrase captured our imaginations as a people because it painted a true picture of what each of us has to endure at some point in our lives: a time of loneliness and desolation in our spiritual or emotional existence. Everyone knows the "dark night of the soul," and everyone needs the healing power of light to dispel such darkness and bring us back to the warmth of day and the strength of hope.

Hope is what the ancients were looking for when they stood upon the hilltops waiting for the sun to rise on the day after Winter Solstice. That first ray of the sun touched their faces with the promise that life and light would return. Sometimes I think that that experience of first sunrise in the east could be something humans have been responding to for tens of thousands of years or more, in every primitive stage of our existence. Light, the touch of light, holds a deep power in our psyches, a power of awe and wonder, a power of healing and hope.

So we light candles, and plug in those strings of Christmas reds and greens, and stare at the orange flames in the fireplace, and feel touched, literally, by the power of light. Even starlight has been imbued with such power, as in the story of the Wise Men who followed

a star. Stars have been our guiding lights since as long as we have grown eyes to see and minds to comprehend. We give them meaning, as we give meaning to the rising sun, the first light, and all the amazing natural events going on around us all the time.

Kat and I saw a falling star the other evening. I had gone to pick her up at the airport Sunday night at 11:30 PM. She had come home from Boston to stay, having quit her job at the UUA, and I was so happy to see her, to hug her. She marveled at the saguaros around the parking lot, and I remembered it had been August since she was last in the desert. We drove north on Tucson Boulevard and the first amazing thing we saw was a coyote in the road. Kat was so excited; we felt like Arizona was welcoming her home. "What would a Shaman have to say about that?" I exclaimed.

"What would we have to say about it?" she retorted.

"You're right," I said. "We can have it mean whatever we want, regardless of the fact that it's midnight and we're not usually out on the road at this time, so maybe coyotes are here all the time. Or not. They're welcoming you home!"

When we pulled into the driveway at our house, Kat got out to stare up at the stars. I found the Big Dipper and Orion, and as we were looking around, a falling star shot into the north. We both burst out laughing. Talk about the universe giving a blessing! We were searching for one, and so we found it.

There is a saying that you don't find what you need until you're looking for it. Or, in other words, things don't have meaning until you're ready to give it to them. If you're not into religion, you won't pay attention to or remember religious events and information. If you're not looking for a free faith, you won't find it. Then, when you start feeling a need for one, and start looking, you find Unitarian Universalism and say, "Where have you been all my life?"

The real question is, "Why are you surprised?"

Haven't you found that when you become interested in something, all of a sudden it's as if the universe starts throwing those things your way? Our eyes are opened in a new way to something, and we see that new interest everywhere we turn. It's not that they weren't there before; we just didn't see them.

Here's another example. This summer, my parents, Kat, and I went to St. Louis early, before the General Assembly started. We rented a car and drove across the Mississippi River to Cahokia Mounds, which is a World Heritage Site. My mother said I had been there when I was little, but I didn't remember it.

I was amazed! In addition to the mounds which were built of dirt around a thousand years ago, there was a place they called "Woodhenge." This was a circle of wooden poles, built around 1100 AD, as sun calendars for determining the seasons, with the sunrise aligning with different poles at various times of the year. I recognized the

similarity to Stonehenge, after which Woodhenge was named, but I had no idea that our Native American cultures had acquired this same technique from across the sea somehow, sometime in history. I do know about the hundredth monkey syndrome, but don't think it is the case here.

(The hundredth monkey syndrome goes something like this: researchers watched a monkey learn to wash a piece of food in the stream, then teach its young to do it, and then others one by one. But somewhere around the time a hundred of them had learned to do it, suddenly, all of the monkeys everywhere were doing it without having been taught or been in contact with the food-washing monkeys. Somehow the skill was spread to all the monkeys on all the islands simultaneously. At least, that's how I remember it.)

So, in August Curtiss and I got to go to England and we decided to see Stonehenge, also a World Heritage Site. This site is much more ancient, going back five thousand years. I remembered visiting it when I was fifteen, back in 1971. I didn't know, though, that there was a Woodhenge there, too, dating from 2300 BC. Whether our ancestors brought this knowledge over the Bering Sea, or with Vikings along the Greenland coastal way, or even like the sailors of Ra, and those who built the Mayan pyramids, humans have been creating these similar sacred structures to measure the seasons and celebrate solstice on different continents separated by an ocean and thousands of years.

The guidebook says that the reason Stonehenge was built was "to mark not the longest day but the shortest—the turning of the year after which light and life would return to the world." (p. 19, *Stonehenge*) Maybe that's a modern English interpretation, but considering our religious heritage and the stories and myths we have inherited, I would tend to believe it. Light has become a symbol of life, and we celebrate it year after year after year, rightly so, joyfully, hopefully.

Woodhenge was there when I visited Cahokia Mounds as a child, but I didn't remember it. The Woodhenge in England was there when I visited as a teenager, but I didn't notice it. Only now, when I was paying attention, and interested, did I feel as though I had just come across them, and two in one summer! How strange is that? Or not!

Falling stars and coyotes are around all the time. We won't see them, though, unless we go outside and look. It helps when it's the right time, of course. The point is that when we need symbols and signs, we create them. We seek them out. We paint our world with symbolism and metaphor, and it's a good thing. We are not just literal, physical, factual creatures; we're mystical, metaphorical, imaginal creatures. We love and sing and dream and hope and none of those can be measured in a petrie dish or with a sextant.

There are always signs of hope in the world. Are you looking for them? Do they make you laugh? Are you amazed?

I hope so. Enjoy this Season of Light and Life. Happy Solstice!

