

**The United Church of Canada
Conseil régional Nakonha:ka Regional Council
Lennoxville United Church**

Theological Reflection
December 2019

Happy Holidays!!!

I am a Christian who is comfortable wishing others good tidings with a 'Happy Holidays' and I am happy to hear others wish me the same. I think it is a way to recognize that there are so many different celebrations around this time of the year, and that some of them are more than 2000 years old. Many of our modern Christmas traditions come from other religious celebrations, and many have evolved over time. The Christmas tree is a perfect example of a Christmas traditions that existed before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth; the Yule log is another. Humans have been gathering and celebrating together during this time of year for millenia, and I am glad that we still do.

For thousands of years humans have been marking this time with celebrations of good cheer... why? Mostly because of the weather. For us northern hemisphere livers, this time of year is marked with the coming winter and growing darkness. The ancients celebrated this time to demonstrate their trust that the darkness would not win, the cold winter could not last forever, spring would come, the light would return. It's a time after the harvest, and it was the only time of the year that meat was abundant. Not all livestock would make it through the winter, so the herd would be thinned before the deep frost. It was a time that people were more intimate with the cycles of life and death on this moving planet. For me, there is something beautiful about humans coming together to celebrate, to party and have a good time in defiance of winter's cold, dark howl.

The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas; Easter was there main High Holy Day. There is no evidence of Christians celebrating Jesus' birth for the first 200 years of Christian practice. It wasn't until the year 380 that the Feast of the Nativity was made an official High Holy Day within the church. This was done, in part, to emphasize the goodness in the physical; if God was born in the form of a human baby, then the physical was at the very least redeemable. This theology was in opposition to gnosticism, and particularly priscillianism which was condemned as a heresy at the same time that the Feast of the Nativity was made official. The date, December 25th, was chosen as the day to celebrate because of the festivals that were already occurring at this time of year. The Roman way, was to adapt what already existed, so rituals of feasting and rights of the poor that were associated with Saturnalia (a Roman Holiday) became rituals for celebrating the birth of Jesus. This borrowing of traditions continued over the next 1000 years as the Feast of the Nativity, transformed into Christ's Mass by the middle ages, and eventually became known simply as Christmas.

There are so many ways to mark this time of the year. I love the lights that people put on their house to brighten up the growing darkness. I love the rituals of gathering with others to rest and reconnect with friends and family. I love that today I can get a yule log made out of ice cream. What is clear to me is that we need to celebrate at this time of year, we need to be reminded that the winter will not last forever, we need to remember that the light will return, what seems dead will be reborn. One of my most important traditions to mark this season happens on December 24th, when I go to church to sing the carols and hear the story... There were shepherds watching their flocks by night... and so if this tradition also marks your celebration of this season have a very Merry Christmas!

Blessings, Rev. Linda Buchanan