

Love Shines in the Darkness
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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This is the darkest time of the year. We are very near the winter solstice, the shortest day and the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere, and since 90% of the human population lives north of the equator, this is a nearly universal experience for human beings on this planet. The sun comes up later and goes down earlier, the weather turns colder and the trees stretch their bare arms to catch what warmth there is, since they have lost their bright autumn jackets of red and gold leaves.

We humans are like sunflowers – we respond to the life-giving light of the sun; we turn our faces toward that burning orb, our nearest star. We waken when it appears in the east, we sleep when it drops into the west, we mourn it when the days grow short and the nights long and cold. Our hearts follow the sun, our lives depend on it.

When the sun is gone – which happens every night – we fear the dark and cold, sensing that evil may lurk there, and we take comfort in the light of the stars. We wish on the stars, and remember the stories about gods and heroes whose figures are found in the constellations. Ancient people did not know that the stars were distant suns themselves, and that our own sun was just another star – but much closer and therefore much bigger to us, and of course, all-important to life on our planet.

And when the days grow shorter and colder, we kindle fires to create the light we so much miss, to support us in the dark times, and to remind ourselves that the light is coming back, if we are just strong and patient through the long nights and the cold and darkened days.

In cultures around the world, and throughout history in story, song, rock painting, and in the images in holy shrines, from pyramids to caves, we find stories of the sun – celebrating the sun, worshipping the sun, sacrificing to the sun, lighting fires to communicate with the sun, worrying about the sun’s disappearance, rejoicing in its safe return, creating stories to explain the sun’s behavior, and holding festivals to involve the community in ritual and celebration related to the sun’s cycles.

In ancient Persia, the sun god was named Mithras, the soldiers' god of light, born on the winter solstice, bringing light and goodness into the world. The last day of the Persian month Azar is the longest night of the year, when the dark forces of Ahriman are at the peak of their strength. The sun has lost its power. Families celebrated this event, on the day called Yalda, by keeping vigil through the night, burning fires to help the Mithras, the sun and Goodness, battle the evil of darkness. At this time of long nights and much darkness, the Black God and other evil spirits are most potent. The old sun dies on the winter solstice, defeated by the dark and evil powers of the Black God.

The day after the solstice, the day of sun, marks the victory of Sun over the darkness. The rising of the new sun marks the turning of the season away from darkness and toward the time of light. The Romans adopted this day as Saturnalia, Dies Natalis Solis Invicti – the day of the birth of the conquering sun, the invincible sun.

The early Celts, in Ireland, England and Scotland, worshiped the sun, and our celebrations now reflect their ceremonies to call back the sun at the Solstice. The burning fires, the holly and the mistletoe, the tree decorated with lights and tinsel and shiny bright ribbons, reflect the old belief that bright and shiny things contain the essence of the sun, and that repel the evil that threatens us in the darkness.

Our human ancestors around the world celebrated the festival of the Solstice, beckoning and welcoming the sun: in China, in Europe, the Middle East and Tibet, in Peru and South Africa, and especially in those nations near the Arctic Circle where the darkness is most intense. We share a common heritage with all humankind at this time of the year, moving through the darkness and welcoming the return of life-giving warmth and light.

Minister Eileen Karpeles wrote these words:

The sun, an errant lover,
Has wandered off. Only if wooed by me
Will it return. The ancient incantations
I now recite. I tell the ancient stories
Of hope made manifest, deftly prepare the feast:
Pack love and tinsel into every gift.
Most magical of all, I light a candle --
My act of faith, to guide the sun's return.

We light candles in many ways, but one of the most present and most powerful is by creating human bonds – creating family, creating friendship, creating a community of love. There is love – here. There is light – here. There is light in the stars, and in the sun. Our very being together kindles a flame of faith and hope. We turn to the sun and stars to find the light, we turn to each other to find the light, we turn within ourselves to find the light.

In that bright hope, every day is a day of the birth of the invincible sun. We are moving now into the time of flickering flame, of rising sun, of our birth into new beginnings. We remember the bulbs hidden deep and safe under the cold, hard winter ground, knowing that they are stirring, the tender shoots beginning to appear, preparing to blossom in shades of glory, heralds of spring as the sun warms the earth and stirs the life within.

At this dark and hopeful time of year it is fitting that we celebrate the birth of a child, and the rebirth of the sun, for so new life dawns within us and around us each day.