

Psalm 96:1-13 ^{ESV} Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! ² Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. ³ Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! ⁴ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. ⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. ⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! ⁸ Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! ⁹ Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; ¹ tremble before him, all the earth! ¹⁰ Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

“Sing the New Song”

We take a lot of things for granted in the Christian faith and tradition simply because we never take the time to question why we do the things we do other than to say “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” Here at Claude we’ve done this Candle Lighting service this way for the last six years with a few tweaks here and there and then who knows how long before that there’s been a Christmas Eve Candle Lighting service here. “It’s just what we’ve always done it.” So modern be.

The date we celebrate Christmas is also something we let go unquestioned. Why December 25th? Ask any good Pagan out there and they’ll tell you that it was the Roman Church back in the 4th and 5th centuries Christianizing one of their Winter Solstice festivals to keep their converts from celebrating a Pagan festival; much in the same way that so many Secularists and Atheists can’t seem to stop celebrating some form of Christmas. It is no secret that December 25th is simply the day that tradition says Jesus was born. No one knows for sure what the real date was. Actually, it used to be celebrated on January 6th, a day we now call Epiphany on which we celebrate the visit of the three wise men. In rural Great Britain, in Appalachian mountain culture, and even in Irish communities in Newfoundland January 6th is called Old Christmas Day. Want to know what happened?

In the days of Julius Caesar the Roman Empire operated according to a twelve month lunar calendar that was grossly inaccurate. The stars in the sky would never line up the same day from year to year. His astronomers convinced him to go to a solar calendar (which should have clued somebody in way back then that the earth revolved around the sun, but...). In 45BC he instituted a calendar of 365 and a quarter days divided into twelve months with a leap year every four years; the Julian calendar. Even so, the year was still off by eleven minutes and fifteen seconds so that every 128 years an extra day would creep in. So, in 1582 on the advice of his chief astronomer, Christopher Clavius, Pope Gregory removed those eleven odd minutes from the year and adjusted the calendar ten days making October 5 become October 15 and thus gave us the Gregorian calendar. This move met with great adversity among the populace who thought it was just a ploy by landlords to get more rent out of them.

Great Britain altogether refused to make the switch. After all the turmoil of going Protestant at the whim of Henry the VIII, they were not going to bend the knee to Rome over a calendar. But finally in 1752 Parliament made the change and removed eleven days from the calendar. This caused a great outcry among the populace as well. People accused the government of actually stealing eleven days from their lives. By this time, the Scots-Irish had begun to settle in the mountains of the American colonies. Most were horse thieves on the run or just general government haters who didn’t want to live under no man’s rule. In the mountains they continued to celebrate Old Christmas Day for several generations. Some communities today will commemorate it in one way or another while others will celebrate a full twelve days of Christmas.

There are a few superstitions that people have concerning Old Christmas. Don’t lend anyone money on Old Christmas Day because you’ll never get it back. No matter how much snow is on the ground the Elder Bush will still put up sprouts. Some say the Holy Spirit manifests itself in special ways on Old Christmas morning. If you go outside at midnight on Old Christmas Eve you can hear the animals praying; yet not their normal bellows and bleats. It’s a kind of crying hearkening back to the animals in the stable at Jesus’ birth.

A few fiddle tunes have arisen from the tradition as well. One called *Breakin’ up Christmas* is popular in North Carolina communities. It’s a bit of a foot stomper meant to aid in the twelve days of celebrating. Another one comes out of the much harsher and more isolated region of central West Virginia from the Carpenter family tradition. It’s called Old Christmas Morning. It is a complicated tune, as angry as those who had eleven days of their lives taken away. It’s also a droning, rhythmic, even clarion kind of tune that has something the announce. I’m going to play it for you here in a minute but first I need to explain it. It has two parts, an A and a B part. The A part is harsh and shrill and it reminds me of the sin-burdened screaming of the human heart. The B part introduces a dramatic change with a more lilting rhythm and melody that seems a proclamation of Good News. Also, throughout the song there is a deep drone going on with the bass string making the song sort of resonate with everything that’s out there. The song reminds me of humanity now being changed by the incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus of Nazareth. By the powerful working of the Holy Spirit that event changes those who are enlivened by the Holy Spirit to hear. To me, the song proclaims the Good News that the Trinity has invaded his creation with new life by means of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the

deep droning gives the feeling of life resonating in the union of God and humanity and exploding forth from the womb or even the grave into song. Bear with me as I play it and remember, I'm a sinner.

(For those reading this sermon online Old Christmas Morning can be heard being played by Erynn Marshall, a Canadian honorary West Virginian, on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3t6AVKt43k>)

The birth of Jesus, Son of God/son of Mary was a quantum tunnelling event in the midst of the nothingness of humanity that at his death and resurrection exploded into the song, the worship song, the Big Bang of New Creation. We, you and me, our lives are part of that song. By the gift of the Holy Spirit we each have been made alive to sing that song even if it is monotone and we don't know the words. It's the song of hope, the hope that God is putting his creation to rights. It's a song of peace; no other song can bring people otherwise enemies to reconciliation and sharing a meal. It's a song of joy; not happy, happy, happy all the time, but rather rejoicing, praising God because we know, we've felt, and we've been the beneficiaries of the grace and love of God. It's a song of love; of laying ourselves aside and honouring everyone for humanity has had its dignity restored. God the Son has become and forever remains one of us. Amen.