

A Celtic Christmas: Celebrating the Sacred in All Creation

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We are in a season of contradictions. Lights glitter from every structure; meanwhile, the days lengthen, and darkness begins to come earlier, stay later. A little shiver runs through our pre-electric-light, primordial selves. The ancient human family viewed this time of year with trepidation. They lit fires for warmth and light, and wondered what the winter would bring. No longer concerned with a lack of food and shelter during the freezing winter months, we turn on the central heat, put on a fleece-lined parka and wait for the weather report.

Yet underneath our civilized response to the season, we may sense our human roots. We may look at the dark velvet dome of the night sky laced with stars, and wonder. It is a season that mysteriously brings together death and birth—death of the old season, the old year, the growth from last summer's garden; birth of the new light after December 21, the Winter Solstice, and birth of the community that is formed as we turn inward with the season. It is the season when Christianity celebrates the birth of Jesus, also called Immanuel or God-with-us.

This is the season when we remember that darkness may be fruitful—the darkness of the soil where the hidden seed sleeps, or the darkness of the womb where new life is created. This is the darkness of gestation, the darkness in which creative spirit begins to make the first silent stirrings, taking form and flesh. We celebrate the deep compatibility of the divine and the human as we rejoice in the Incarnation—in God's life being revealed to us in the baby boy born at Bethlehem, God being birthed into human life, taking on human nature from the inside out.

Historically, at this time of the year, the peoples of the Celtic lands (Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Galicia) marked the natural rhythm as autumn turned to winter. This was a time for watching for the light's return, even in the midst of darkness. This was a time for pondering endings and beginnings. As Christianity came to these lands, perhaps as early as the first century, there was a ready embracing of the proclamation that Jesus was the Son of God. As far as we can tell, the pre-Christian religious practices of the Celtic peoples were inclined to celebrate the natural world as shot through with divine presence. For them, a faith tradition that celebrated the divine becoming human was plausible, welcome and true. Incarnation was not a stumbling block as it was to the Greeks. This faith that had a central story of a man who came from God and returned to God, a man who was God's Son, did not seem so far-fetched to the Celtic mind.

Harkening back to a time when the church was one, and having resonance with Eastern Orthodox theology, the Celtic Christian tradition is at ease with proclamations from the early church, such as this from Maximus Confessor: "The Word of God, who is God, wills always and in all things to work the mystery of his embodiment." The Celtic Christian tradition would agree with C. S. Lewis when he writes, "God loves matter; he invented it." George McLeod, who founded the modern Iona Community in Scotland, said "Matter matters."

At this season of the year, when we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus in the midst of the hubbub in Bethlehem, this tradition invites us to notice God being birthed in our midst, in one another, in our friend, in our foe. As an old Welsh poem states,

*Mary nurtures a Son in her womb:
His birth a blessing to those who discover him.
He goes forth like the sun,
great is the number of his company.*

