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Wednesday December 10, 2014

Hanging onto imaginary ropes

By Jim Taylor

Here in the northern hemisphere, the midday sun sinks lower towards the southern horizon every day.

We know it will come back up. Ancient civilizations could not be as confident. They erected solar observatories, like Stonehenge, to track what they saw as the sun's – not the earth's -- wobble. They sank tunnels deep into earth mounds, as at Newgrange in Ireland, which would be penetrated by sunlight on only one moment a year.

In South America, the Incas built their temples around a stone hitching post. The rest of the structure could consist of individual stones, meticulously fitted to withstand recurring earth tremors. But the hitching post itself had to be carved from solid bedrock. Because it anchored the imaginary rope that reined in the sun from its headlong plunge towards the horizon.

Imaginary ropes? It sounds ridiculous to the modern mind.

Because we now know exactly why the sun arcs overhead. It's all about all the tilt of the earth's axis relative to the plane of the earth's annual ecliptic orbit around the sun. (If that explanation makes little sense to you, you might prefer the imaginary rope.)

Thanks to astronomy and mathematics, we can calculate exactly when the sun will reverse its decline. In the Okanagan, that moment comes at 3:03 p.m., Pacific Time, on Sunday, December 21.

But I wonder how many imaginary ropes we still wrap around bedrock beliefs.

Winter festivals

Almost every civilization has some kind of festival of lights. Diwali, Chanukah, Christmas – they all occur during the months when darkness increases its momentum. In our culture, even pagans and atheists celebrate Christmas. Are those twinkling lights, perhaps, our imaginary rope -- a symbolic act that defies the darkness to advance any farther, an affirmation that darkness cannot overcome us?

It's no coincidence that Christmas happens near the winter solstice.

The Roman festival of Saturnalia was also a time of candles and extravagant light. It suspended most of the social taboos. For the week around the winter solstice, slaves and owners mingled in an atmosphere of pseudo-equality. Laws and prohibitions were temporarily suspended, with lots of singing, dancing, and drinking.

In that freewheeling atmosphere, the new Christian communities could celebrate without fear of persecution. Any other time of year, they were considered traitors; they refused to worship the Roman emperor as god.

So December 25 became their imaginary rope, connecting them to Jesus' birth. Even though his birthdate wasn't made official until AD 354.

Imaginary, because there is nothing, absolutely nothing, in the Bible that defines that date of Jesus' birth.

It wouldn't be stated as December 25, of course. The calendars we use today didn't exist yet. The Roman calendar of the time was based on the founding of Rome some 500 years before.

There isn't even a reference that links Jesus' birth to a Jewish festival -- unlike Easter, which is always associated with Passover.

But a lot of people remain convinced that Jesus was born on December 25. They wrap their imaginary rope around an imaginary date, and hang on tight.

I wonder how many other imaginary ropes we keep hanging onto.

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YOUR TURN

In last week's column, I argued that it is only our own ego-centrism that inclines us to see deliberate and intentional patterns in the stars that are, in

fact, only visible from this one small planet on the edges of a relatively unimportant galaxy, but still we think they were put there for our benefit.

Diane Robinson picked up the theme: “The proliferation of ‘selfies’ taken any-and-everywhere is an example of your thesis [about ego-centrism] -- a thesis in which I sense a certain.....sadness? A sadness that I share! It seems to me that we humans are -- and always have been -- an egocentric, even selfish, species. Sadly I fear that our egocentrism will be the ultimate undoing of ourselves....and, alas, this rocky planet and its other inhabitants.”

Alison Playfair applied my thoughts locally: “Thanks for your thoughts -- both last week and today. It immediately brought to mind the way some in the congregation I serve can nod their heads and agree intellectually to the need for drastic change and to see things from other perspectives (all the unchurched or de-churched or folks from other faiths) and then blithely go on about their routine worship/fellowship as if the world still revolved around their own understanding of what it means to be faithful or to be a child of God, and cannot see that that the doctrines they learned as children are not the only way to believe nor the only faithful way to be a positive loving presence in this world. I continue to pray that God is at work here as well, shining light into our own darkness.

I hadn’t heard from Stephani Keer for a while, but she asked, “. . . And so, O sensei, what /S at the other end of a black hole?

“More seriously,” Stephanie went on, “this column brought to mind this marvellously evocative and unrelentingly true insight of Aeschylus: ‘He who learns must suffer, and, even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.’ Sorrow is holy ground indeed.”

Perhaps the only way we can learn, Aeschylus may be saying, starts with our being disabused of our own importance.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The psalm scheduled for Advent 3 is Psalm 126. Considering all the charges of

harassment, etc., that have been flying around the last month, I thought this paraphrase might be apropos. I dedicate it to all men who are discovering how they have been imprisoned by the macho myth, and all women who support those men venturing into their new world.

1 The truth dawns on us -- we are appalled at what we have been.

For too long we have been captives of our self-image;

For too long we have let ourselves live a lie.

2 But now we are free!

Instead of narrow roles, we can see new horizons!

Our chains have fallen off--we can move freely once more.

Behind their bars, some still shake their heads,

But those who preceded us into freedom weep tears of joy.

3 This change could not come through our individual efforts;

It must have been God's work.

4 But now we are afraid, Lord.

The uncharted wilderness of our new world stretches before us;

we no longer know which way to turn.

5 Fearful of falling, we take tentative steps.

We would love to run effortlessly.

6 We have thrown away so many opportunities;

There is so little time left.

For this chance to start again, Lord, we thank you.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
