

Homily for December 4, 2005.

*“Longing for Darkness under a Sunny Sky.”*

By The Reverend Lone Jensen

We are so full of contradictions, we human beings. Well most of us anyhow. Maybe you are the exception. But why is it that we always seem to want what we do not have? I spent my childhood and my youth under dark and gray Nordic skies longing for the light and dreaming of sunshine. Some of you may have grown up somewhere up north too and may remember, as do I, that to catch even just a glimpse of the pale weak sun, a weak ghost of its Arizona self, in the middle of December, was a rare and wonderful event. Now I walk in sunny brightness almost every day and it is still amazing to me. Winter was the season to show how tough you were, to brave dark foggy mornings where your breath hung frozen in the air and laugh off that pain you get when your frostbitten feet and hands finally begin to warm up. Here I have roses in my garden and I can, anytime I want to, slip into our homeowner's association's heated pool and pretend to be a middle aged rather well fed Christmas seal in impossible 84 degree water.

So what do I do? Am I happy? Satisfied? No! December arrives laden with holy days and ancient memories and I light candles and long for darkness! Candle flames almost disappear in the bright sun. My grandmother used to light candles in the windows in the blue twilight of the early afternoon and sit and watch the dusk settle, darkness creeping over the busy city streets on small cat's paws. How do I make sense of solstice and Yule when I have to use my imagination to really see the sun diminish? It has definitely not gone away. Yule, the old name for those ancient winter solstice days, is the light and sun being born again in deep, midnight blue, velvety black darkness. This is darkness you can feel, touch and taste, darkness that creeps deep into your soul. Candles are not a luxury in such climates they are absolutely essential survival tools. Now I would not really want to return to those seasonal depressions, have my eyes grow dim with the relentless grayness and my soul ache winter with winter weariness. But I still perversely long for darkness. There is a voice in me somewhere that longs for darkness and whispers seductively: do you remember?

Why do we want the impossible? Inside this fifty nine year old body is a sad child that wants the magic back. Nostalgia they call it, this insistence on taking out ancient memories and dusting them off for the season, and watch them glow golden in the dim

light and likely faulty memory of the present. My husband and son would shake their head at my insistence upon certain traditions, not generally practiced around here, like putting out pagan straw goats and feeding the nisse, a sort of Danish trickster in wooden shoes, rice porridge with butter and cinnamon to keep him happy. Or else there is no telling what he might do. I already have a hard enough time remembering where my keys are so this year the nisse will get one giant enormous bowl of porridge. I need all the help I can get with every passing year. Oh December is a tender time, full of crazy contradictions. Look only on the surface and it is a month that can make us all into crazy Scrooges and harried elves, with lights and decorations out before Halloween and expectations turned on way too high. Be merry, be very merry, buy lots of toys, bigger toys and more of everything, drink a lot, eat too much, abandon your selves and pay for it all in January when you go repentant back to the gym.

Where is the sacred in all this? What do you long for this Solstice, this Christmas and Hannukah? What would make the best present of all? Sometimes it will be what we least come to expect. I found this story in a Skinner House meditation manual. It is called Ding-a-ling-a-ling!

*When I was a child, the day after Thanksgiving was steeped in ritual. We'd tromp up and down Michigan Ave., admiring store windows. The day always held magic, mostly because of my dime laden mittens. In the morning, my dad would give my sister and me each a handful of dimes, which I kept in my mittens as we walked in anticipation of finding another one of "them"—Salvation Army Christmas buckets. I marveled in watching my dimes swirl their way to the quarter-sized slot and plunk in. At the time, I knew nothing about Salvation Army theology, only that they worked for the homeless and destitute. They became my symbol of generosity for the season.*

*As an adult, I often felt an odd pull to ring the bell myself. One year I gave in. I called up the lieutenant at the local Salvation Army and asked if they were in need of help. They were. I was given two assignments. I couldn't wait to get my hands on that little tinkly bell.*

*The first assignment was an experience just as I had hoped: I rang the bell, people asked me if I was warm enough, a couple bought me coffee, many smiled. The second assignment was at a mall. I itched to start my ring-a-dinging. The lieutenant arrived to set up my bucket. My hands reached for the bell. No bell. He explained, "The mall owners have complained, no bells, only this." He handed me a sign.*

*The sign was attached to a long dowel. On the top of the dowel, two pieces of paper were stapled together over the center of the stick. One side read “DING,” the other “DONG.” Instead of ringing, I now had to flip a sign that read “DING-DONG.” My enthusiasm waned. I flipped in silent motion. People pushed past each other, mired in that Christmas hubbub that leans toward frustration, not joy. Then they’d spot me. Their faces would contort, scrunching up into laughter. I fought hard not to feel like the sign was projecting my mental state to the mall community.*

*For four hours I flipped—the sign, that is. Ten minutes before I was to quit, this fellow in black cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat walked up to me and bent over, hysterically laughing. I was ready to kick him in the shins for his reaction to me and my now stupid sign.*

*Then he said, “Anybody that stands with a sign that says ‘Ding-Dong’ must be duly rewarded.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a fifty dollar bill, neatly folded it and squeezed it into the bucket.*

*I now felt strangely in awe of my DING-DONG sign. I was unabashedly proud that I was stupid enough to stand in a mall tenaciously flipping a sign, waiting for humor and generosity to awaken someone’s humdrum spirit. Waiting for it to finally dawn on me that my gifts of generosity and time needed to lose their*

*pretenses in order for any true generosity to occur. Waiting, just to discover, that this season can still thrill and surprise. Waiting for magic, only to find that red buckets held it all the time. Even without the ding-a-ling.*

Her story made me smile in recognition. Sure I can long for that old blue Nordic twilight of a childhood long ago, sure I can want what I cannot have but if I do that I may lose the real gift of joy in the present. How about you? Yes, I know these holy days can be tender and that we humans are fragile beings. I know with every passing year I miss more people who have gone before me into the twilight of my memories. Maybe that is why we sometimes get so grouchy around these days. If our hearts are really open we will find both joy and tears. It is much easier to be a cynic and complain about the overindulgence. It is also easier to rush about until we are simply too tired to feel anything. Easier than to risk sitting quietly in the darkness and reflect on the state of our souls, to notice the rough edges and worn places, to understand what it is we really need this season. The desert stars reflect eternity and the sacred back to us as surely as did our childhood skies. God, however we understand her, surely speaks in all languages but can be heard most clearly in the silence. And no it does not matter really if you are a believer or not. The stars are

real, present and sacred. The darkness around us nurtures our souls.

I invite you now to take the time to discover what it is you long for in this season of almost dark. We will be passing around stars, and you may take one. Let it be your guiding star this season. Take a pen or pencil and write on it a word, a blessing, a wish or a hope. Make it simple, like calm or peace or joy or rest or time or health or healing. It is up to you. Take the star home and put it on your refrigerator, stick it on your computer, on your mirror or keep it in you pocket, Let it be a reminder to treasure the gift of these holy days with all that the winter solstice brings us. Amen and blessed be.

If you need more pencil please raise your hand and our ushers will bring them to you.