

Winter Solstice: The Bottom of the Well

A Homily by Aaron McEmrys

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The Winter Solstice is a time of banking back the coals, of sitting quietly around a warm stove with those whose hearts beat in time with your own. The Solstice is a short shaft of sunlight quickly eclipsed by darkness, and not a fearful darkness, but rather a darkness like the one that envelopes you when you pull a warm old comforter over your head on a chilly morning.

And whatever else it is, the Winter Solstice is always a time for stories. And so this morning, I will tell you a Solstice Story. This is not a demanding sermon, and it requires no great feats of intellect or girding of strength. It is a story. Simple if you want it to be simple, and rich with symbols and allusion if you are in the mood to delve deep and listen for the words between the lines.

Let us begin.

Tristan grunted as he helped his father heave the giant (and very heavy) green Yule log into the hearth. He was only thirteen years old and the log was as big as he was. Soon his parents would light the thick green log, which would burn smokily for several days full of itchy throats and coughing because their chimney wasn't very good.

Still, even with the coughing, this was one tradition that Tristan's family celebrated every single year – as they had for generations out of mind.

They would light the huge Yule log on the shortest, darkest day of the year – right about now, in fact, and then keep that fire lit until the whole log was reduced to ash. Because the log was so big, this could take days, and the whole time the family and their neighbors would celebrate – day and night – one giant party full of food and drink and singing and storytelling.

And smoke – did I mention how smoky it was? Tristan was not looking forward to the Solstice. Because he was the oldest, he had tons of extra chores to do – chopping wood, taking care of the sheep, fetching water – you name it, Tristan had to do it. And then, when he finally got done with all his chores, he couldn't relax even for a minute because their cottage was full to the brim with his little sisters and brothers, who never seemed to stop crying except when they were hogging all the attention from the grown ups. That, plus the smoke that made him cough – plus the feeling of being invisible because nobody seemed to know he was there except when they needed something fetched, chopped or carried – made Tristan wish the whole stupid solstice would just be over.

So once the Yule log was lit and the babies started crying and cooing and being all cute again – Tristan snuck out of the cottage to be by himself. He felt lonely and resentful as he roamed our across the moors. Even though it was close to sunset, Tristan walked farther and farther across the pastures. He thought he would check on the sheep. At least they always seemed happy to see him.

Tristan eventually found the herd in one of the farthest pastures, by the old homestead his great-grandparents had lived in. They were munching the frosty grass as usual and only looked up for a minute when Tristan arrived. The sheep might not have been the friendliest of creatures or the best conversationalists, but at least they weren't squalling and pooping their pants all the time like the babies back home. He sat on an old stone fence and just watched them eat.

After a while though, his ears perked up at a half-heard sound. It was hard to make out, but it sounded almost like a baby crying or someone calling for help. It was a high, distant sound – and Tristan shivered – afraid that it might be one of the ghosts that were said to walk these moors at night, especially around the Solstice, when the veil between the worlds was thin.

But afraid as he was, Tristan couldn't help but be curious. It couldn't be a baby, he thought – not out here. But what if it was? What if some little kid had wandered away and gotten hurt somehow? There were lots of old wells and hollows and caves out here that could be very dangerous for anyone who didn't know their way. Tristan slid off the wall, and set off to find the source of the sound. He was still a bit afraid, but now he also felt brave, like a hero from the old songs. Even if he did meet a ghost he would not back down – although he did wish he had thought to bring some salt in his pocket just in case. Then if he met a ghost he could throw the salt at the ghost, which would have to stop and count

every single salt crystal before it could do anything else. That would have given Tristan plenty of time to get away – but alas – no salt.

The sun was definitely starting to go down now, and the sky was getting dim. It was early in the day – but this was the shortest day of the year – the day that darkness chased the sun away and took over.

Tristan followed the high, sad, echoing cries all across the moors until he came to one of the old wells. The well was so old that nobody remembered who had lived there, or when. It was really just a crumble of ancient stones in a falling circle. You wouldn't even know there was a well there unless you stopped to look inside.

Tristan started running. If someone had fallen in the well they could be badly hurt or maybe even drowning! Panting, he threw himself down on the edge of the well and looked down through the murky gloom. And he saw....he saw...a small white blur at the bottom of the well...a small white blur bleating and crying like a little baby – it was a lamb, a baby sheep that must have wandered away and fallen.

Poor thing!! It sounded so afraid. Without a thought, Tristan started looking for a way down the well – he had to rescue that lamb. The walls were very slippery, but he managed to find a few handholds and footholds to help him get down, but then he slipped and fell and fell all the way to the bottom of the well where he landed with a cold splash next the lamb, which was up to its forelocks in ice cold water.

Tristan jumped up, shocked by the freezing water. He grabbed the lamb around the belly and began searching for handholds to climb out again, scolding the lamb the whole time for being such a stupid baby. But the rocks were far too slippery and try as he might, he could not climb out. “Great”, he thought – “now we’re both stuck down here – stupid baby lamb!”

Tristan yelled and yelled for help, but he knew it wouldn’t do any good. He was far away from the cottage and hadn’t told anyone where he was going. Anyway, everybody would be preparing for the big feast right about now, and the cottage would be full of singing and music and cooking food. Nobody would hear him.

It was starting to get very cold indeed now, and Tristan was getting really scared. He was shivering and wet and starting to cry when the little lamb nuzzled up to him with its little wet nose. The lamb was wet too, but its coat was soft and even warm, like a pair of wet wool socks. Tristan hugged the lamb close and it seemed that they both felt a little better.

Night fell. The stars began to come out, and Tristan could see them reeling and dancing high above him, casting the only light in his world. He could only see a small circle of sky from where he was at the bottom of the well, but somehow the stars seemed warm and comforting. Aside

from the soft breathing of the now sleeping lamb, Tristan had never felt so alone in his entire life, and his heart ached.

He just stood there in the shallow deep water with that lamb in his arms, staring up at the black and twinkling sky. He must have fallen asleep on his feet at some point, and his eyes opened to the sight of a bright star field. It took him a few moments to realize that his head was on his chest and he was looking down at the reflection of a star field in the water at his feet! He laughed out loud then at the thought that he was standing with his feet in the sky amid the moon and the stars! It was so beautiful. He just kept looking up through the top of the well at the real sky and then quickly back down at the mirrored sky reflected at his feet.

Tristan still felt very much alone, but also strangely peaceful. He thought of his family, back there in the hot smoky cottage, and imagined them telling jokes and clapping their hands and stamping their feet to Old Uncle's pipe and whistle songs. He thought of his mother, with her well-worn face and strong hands; his father with his red cheeked, with powerful shoulders and always aching back. Tristan thought about all his family and neighbors and even about his little sisters and brothers who were probably drowsing off now with a faint crust of sugar stuck to their faces from the Yule treats. He remembered how sometimes they looked up at him as if he were the only person in the world, the only person who could help them sit up in their heavy blankets or hold a spoonful of broth for them to drink, which he always remembered to blow on so it wouldn't be too hot. He remembered what it was like to

get up for chores early in the morning when only the birds were awake, so early that when the sun came up it was almost blinding – soaking into his skin and hair and eyes like liquid gold.

Tears ran down his cheeks: tears of loneliness but also of love. Tristan's cold body suddenly felt full of love and warmth and care and he hugged the sleeping lamb closer to his body even though his arms were aching terribly now after who knows how many hours of holding that wooly little body.

In time, the black of the sky at the top of the well grew less black, and the stars began to fade bit by bit as dawn approached. He was jolted out of a half-asleep daze by the distant sounds of shouting getting closer and closer. “Triiiiistan!!!!” “Tristaaaaan!” His heart beating hard in his chest Tristan opened his throat and yelled as loud as he could – he was so loud in fact that even the lamb woke up and began bleating too. Soon Tristan could hear the crunch of approaching footsteps – and then he saw his father's worried face looking down at him from above. “I found him!!” “I think he is unhurt” He's fallen in the well!”

His father lowered a long rope down the well, which Tristan tied around his waist. Then Tristan's father and mother and uncles and aunts and neighbors (who had all been out looking for him all night long) hauled him up out of the well with that little lamb still held firmly in his arms. As he was hauled up, the sky got bigger and bigger and bigger before his eyes until the world seemed unspeakably vast.

Once out, Tristan was almost knocked over by rib-cracking bear hugs from everyone and he cheeks were soon wet with everyone's tears or relief, not to mention his own. It was as if they were one very large and very strange animal, with arms and legs and beards sticking out in all directions.

In all the hugging and crying and laughing and bleating, nobody noticed the shining gold disc of the sun rising swiftly and unstoppably over the hills and fields. It wasn't until the whole family was bathed in the warm light of morning that a strange silence overcame them. There they stood, every one of them, with their faces turned toward the rising sun, which had come back, yet again, after such a long, dark night.

After a while, they all turned to head back to the cottage, and before they had gone more than a few steps, Old Uncle started up with a tune from his whistle and it became a parade all the way home.

By the time they got there, the sun was full up, but the Yule log was still burning merrily in the smoky cottage. Tristan had never felt so happy. His mother brought him a bowl of hot stew and Tristan began gobbling it down hungrily when he suddenly stopped and asked, with an alarmed face "it isn't lamb, is it? His mother said, "no, dear" and everybody laughed.

And so we celebrate the Winter Solstice, Yule, just as people have always done: with stories and with song.

Today, as December 21st approaches, let us go down into our own wells of night together, our own wells of darkness, dreams and mystery.

Although we are here together, we must lower ourselves into the depths of ourselves alone. Here, in the wells of our spirits, we can do the hard and sacred work of reflection. Here we can let go of what needs to be released and embrace that which gives our lives meaning – that which we love most dearly. But even in our darkest hours, even when we are walking in the places so deep inside us that no one else can go – remember that we are still safe and we are still loved – and because of this – we are never truly alone.

This is a time of warm sweaters (even here in Santa Barbara) and nourishing food – a time to conserve, to bank down our coals as we wait for the new sun to rise. For rise it will, more powerfully every day, bringing with it renewal, new life, energy, growth and regeneration. The sun will rise again - and we will rise with it.

Amen. Blessed Be.