

**MARKING THE LONGEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR
THE WINTER SOLSTICE
December 21, 2022**

What is Winter Solstice? Why celebrate it in a church?

In the northern hemisphere, the Winter solstice is the day of the year (December 21/22) when the Sun is farthest south, marking the first day of the season of winter. It is the shortest day of the solar year. For centuries in diverse cultures it has been a moment marked with religious, philosophical and social implications. Out of the darkness of the longest day of the year, the light of the coming summer – and longer days – is reborn. It has long been observed as a moment of rebirth, renewal, and resurrection.

Historians tells us that Christmas – the birth of Jesus of Nazareth – most likely happened in the Fall or Spring when the nights were warmer for the shepherds out in the fields. Near the fourth century, the early Church began to formalize the celebration of Christmas on December 25th, a day that was already a religious holiday in ancient Roman Culture called Saturnalia. It was a wild celebration of the god Saturn in which a mock king was elected (this is the holiday from which the tradition of 12th Night emerged). The ancients burned a yule log on Solstice, to provide light in the darkness, a practice which was transformed and adapted to become our “yule log” of today, and eventually the practice of burning – or putting lights – on a Christmas Tree.

The early church associated Christmas: the birth of Christ, the incarnation of God who comes into our world, with the solstice, the longest of nights, when

the darkness seems to be the most powerful. And yet on this shortest of days, it's the light that has the upper hand, returning, growing, transforming, living. Many ancient sites (such as Stonehenge, Chichen Itza, and Abu Simbel) were built so that the singular light on the equinox would be experienced uniquely on this day. We've discovered that many churches were also built in this way, that the equinox light might illuminate a crucifix or artwork on this day alone. Tonight, we remember the promise that the light shines in the darkness – in all of our darkneses – and that those darkneses cannot overcome it.

Walking the Labyrinth

The labyrinth is an ancient pattern found in many cultures around the world. They've been found on pottery, tablets, and tiles that date back as far as 5,000 years. Many patterns are based on spirals and circles mirrored in nature. In Native American tradition, the labyrinth is identical to the Medicine Wheel and Man in the Maze. The Celts described the labyrinth as the Never-Ending Circle. It is also known as the Ka'bala in mystical Judaism. One feature labyrinths have in common is that they have one path that winds in a circuitous way to the center. The way in is the way out. We utilize labyrinths as a guided prayer path of sorts. They are not mazes or puzzles that need to be solved. Rather, as we follow the path, we journey inward, praying along the way. At the center, we pause in the presence of God – giving, receiving, waiting. When a “sufficient” amount of time has passed, we journey back outward. All along the path, we might notice God is with us, in us and around us.



COLLEGE AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

5951 College Avenue, Oakland CA 94618 | 510 658-3665 | capcoakland.org

