

The Artist's Almanac – December 2018

*In him was life, and the life is was the light of men.
The light shines in the darkness,
And the darkness has not overcome it.*

-John 1, RSV

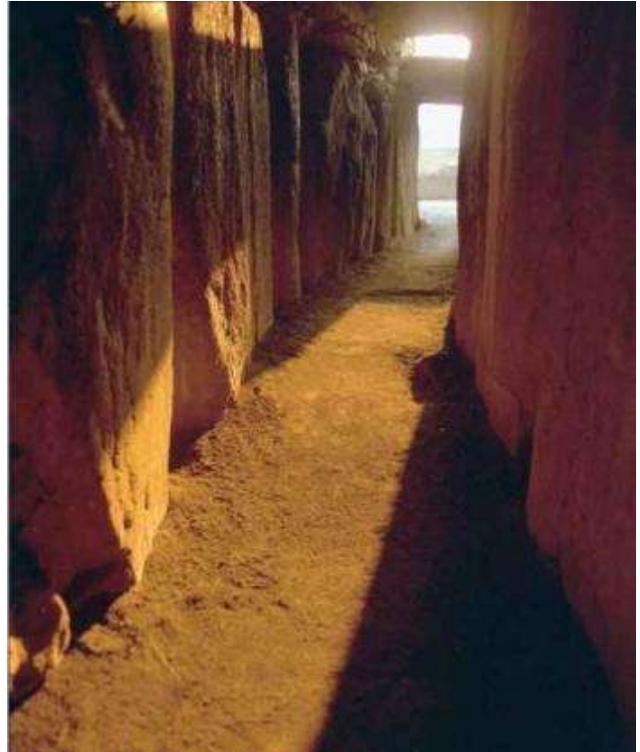
The last pumpkin has been picked, the last leaf has fallen, and the last turnip greens have gone to ground. Darkness rules – cold, unforgiving darkness.

For our ancient agricultural ancestors, December was the season of death and the beginning of starvation time. Yet even they, time out of mind, found something to hope for. It came as the sun fell towards the horizon and threatened to die. Their elders told the young ones the sun would stop its fall, hesitate, and return. They then proved it with a marker at a special place on a special day each year – the winter solstice.

At Stonehenge in England, at the Inca mountaintop shrine of Machu Picchu in Peru, and in Navajo lands of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, astronomical markers signaled the start of the return of the sun to a dark world. For at the solstice. (Solstice is from the Latin *sol*, and *standare*, stands) the sun stops, stands still for a time and paints a brilliant sun dagger on an inner wall of the Canyon. There was hope. The light would return!



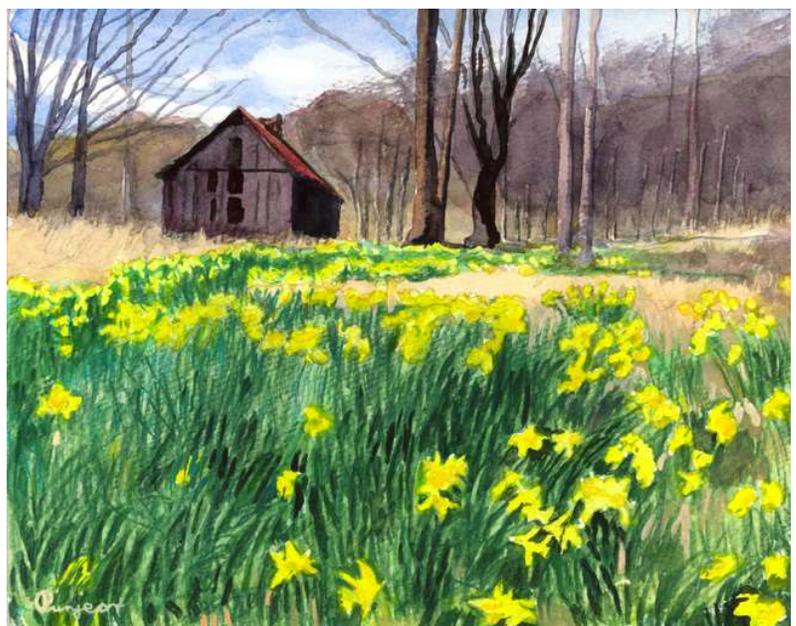
The ancient Druids of Ireland about 3,200 BC built a huge mound of earth, known today as *Newgrange*. Within it for five days during the winter solstice period a beam of sunlight illuminates a small room inside the mound for 17 minutes at dawn.



One source of light is our sun, but there is one stronger still - that of the sun's maker. That is the only answer scientific examiners of The Shroud of Turin can so far come up with for the negative image of a crucified man projected upon a burial cloth woven of fabrics of the first century by a strong burst of light – the light of the resurrection. When converted to a positive image the face of Jesus is the one most common in early images of him used by the Eastern Church. Today we believe that is truly His image.

The point of all this history is just to say that from time out of mind the inhabitants of our world, both ancient and modern, have dread the dead dark and seek the living light.

Now as we moderns, those of us who drive to work in cold fog and home again from work in a sleety drizzle so dark we can only follow taillights of the car before, know that one day the yellow buttercups will rise in choirs to praise the warm sun that draws them forth.



Meantime we sit before our blazing hearths and think of our dear dead, such as my wife and my father, who each died at a winter solstice and who now live in unquenchable light.

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,
-and may perpetual light shine upon them.*



The Light of the World

An early painting by Bill Puryear, c 1969

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¹ In an adobe inn typical of the American Southwest, patrons revel in drunkenness, while in the stable adjacent to them the light of the world is born to an itinerant couple. Shepherds from the hills around, drawn to this event by angel choirs and by the star of Bethlehem reflected in the bucket of well water in the foreground, cast shadows from the birth's brilliance. A curious lamb looks on, while the stabled donkey wonders at the richly caparisoned kings descending the moonlit path from the east, each mounted on a strange beast.