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## **Sunday Sermon: “The Green Man and Christmas”**

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One of the Arthurian myths occurs when Camelot was going through a peaceful spell and Arthur invites all the knights of his realm to court for the Christmas season. The knights start to arrive and the palace has a carnival atmosphere. There are actors and musicians and jesters and jugglers. This was typical of medieval Christmas celebrations; they were referred to as *reveilles*, and are the primary reason that your pilgrim ancestors did not celebrate Christmas. Being puritan they saw all the drunkenness and levity as papist and therefore outlawed the celebration of the Christmas holiday. But in Arthur’s day the celebration went on for weeks and culminated with the celebration of the Christmas banquet which itself would go on for days. As the knights started to assemble in court they would hold various jousts and mock battles for sport and in good-natured competition. There were prizes and wagering on the outcome of the competition.

They eventually became restless and kept asking Arthur when the banquet would begin. Arthur wanted the preliminary events to go on for more days as he was waiting for a few other guests to arrive. He finally remarked that the banquet could not begin until a miracle had occurred. Minutes later a squire appeared and announced the arrival of a strange knight. As he entered the room the other knights were awed as he was the largest knight anyone had ever seen and he was entirely green. This knight wore no armor or helmet, nor carried any shield. For a weapon this green knight carried in one hand only a broad axe that to everyone present looked like the sharpest axe any of them had ever seen and in his other hand he carried a bough of holly. His face was different from other men instead of hair on his face he seemed to grow leaves. His arm hair seemed to be foliage. The skin that was evident under his green clothing, which was embroidered with birds and butterflies, appeared to have a green hue to it.

Even the knight’s horse was green. Just as the other knights had issued challenges so too did this stranger, but his first challenge was to the King. He said he challenged Arthur or any knight to strike his head from his shoulders with his axe. That knight would in turn find the knight next year and would then respond with a blow. This challenge was met with silence from the entire court. Guinevere urged

Arthur not to take up the challenge. Just then Arthur's nephew Gawain begs to accept the challenge and save the honor of the court. The green knight accepts the challenger, Gawain, and knelt to receive the blow. He even pulled away his leafy hair from his neck so the challenger could view his target. The young knight grabbed the axe and struck the target. The green knight's head quickly decapitated and rolled across the floor of the large banquet hall as red blood poured from his green shoulders unto the polished floor.

As quiet ruled the court again, the giant body of the knight rose and retrieved his head and mounting his steed held his head toward Gawain and reminded him that in a year's time the green knight could be found again in the green chapel. "Come," the decapitated head said, "or be known as a coward." The knight left the court and Arthur's miracle performed, the Christmas banquet could begin.

A fourteenth century anonymous poem says it this way: This King Arthur was at Camelot at Christmas with many a lovely lord, and they were all princely brethren of the Round Table, and they made rich revel and mirth and were free from care. And betimes the gentle knights held many a tournament, and jousted in jolly fashion, and then returned they to the court to sing the Christmas carols ... Scarcely had... the first course been served in the court, when there came in at the door an ugly fellow and the tallest of all men on earth. From his neck his loins so square set was he, and so long, and stalwart of limb, that I trow he was half a giant. And yet he was a man, and merriest that might ride...

Great wonder of the knight, Folk had in hall, I ween,

Full fierce he was to sight, And over all bright green...

Thus gaily was this man dressed out in green, and the hair of his horse's head was green, and his fair, flowing locks clung about his shoulders, and a great beard like a bush hung over his breast, and with his hair was cut evenly all round above his elbows ... And he had no helmet (nor hauberk), nor was he armour-plated, nor had he shield or spear with which to smite but in one hand he held a holly branch, that is most green when the groves are all bare, and in the other he held an axe, huge and uncanny, and a sharp weapon was it to describe whoso might wish...

This myth has been taken to mean many things through the centuries but the predominance of the Green man myth, "the Lord of the Forest," in northern Europe

seems to be present to remind the people not to forget their ancient roots and their ancient beliefs.

The story of the green knight is a story of death and rebirth or regeneration. It is a story of dismemberment followed by restoration, one the death of the old year and the birth of the new. The knight like the earth needs a time of rest culminating in the solstice or the longest night like our play on words as the green knight was the largest knight anyone had ever seen. The story was to remind the greatest civilization of its day, Camelot that though they can take on a new religion at this time of year, but they can't forget the old ways, the practice of Yule. The practice of Yule goes back to Stone and Bronze age from the Norsk, German and Angle cultures and was marked with feasts and excessive drinking. While the religion of Arthur's court talked of living again, the religion of the ancient peoples of Arthur's land found that life again reflected in the greenery of those ancient lands and its reliance on the seasons.

In this myth the Green Knight is 'the incarnate spirit of winter, able to present his frightening challenge as the preamble to a battle for the hand of the Spring Maiden, once again bringing us back to the cycle of the earth.

The presence of the green man has been found throughout Northern and Western Europe since it embraced Christianity. The great Cathedral, the minster of Freiburg im Breisgau built in fourteen century Germany has the face of the green man throughout the spires looking down upon the interior of the building. Throughout Britain and northern Europe and from Lebanon to Rumania this image is found in most ancient religious buildings and in pubs signs. His image takes three distinct forms. The first and oldest form is a male head that is formed of leaves, the second is a male head that is spewing foliage from its mouth, beard, hair and ears, and the last is just a personification of a vegetable like a fruit or a head of cauliflower.

The legend of Robin Hood in his Lincoln green is just an expression of this same image. In the south of England there is the legend of the Glastonbury Rose whose red blossom only appears in the dead of winter as does the Christmas cactus. As legend has it, Glastonbury is really Avalon from Arthurian myth but it is also the site of a 7<sup>th</sup> century Abbey which is said to house the Holy Grail at one time. The Holy Grail was said to be tainted with Jesus blood and contributed to many miracles which the rose that blooms in December is one. Note the colors associated with Christmas are green and red; the colors of growth and blood. All

these images are composites like the Unicorn or the griffin that is a lion and eagle or the centaur that is a horse/man. In Heraldic emblems the Green man appears together with mermaids, another composite. As a component, the image is a union of humanity and the plant world. He has become a symbol of the ecology movement.

I toured the Basilica near Buffalo three years ago, but that building is probably too new to have a green man. I had the elements of air, water and earth in the stained glass in my old office in my church in Bethlehem, which was an old Methodist building. The Green Man is known many names: Woodwose, Jack-in-the-Green, Wild or Savage Man, and Woodhouse. Robin Hood and Shakespear's Puck were surely Green Men. In Legend, Merlin was the son of a Wild Man and many other Arthurian Stories tell of knights going into the forest to live as Green Men for a time as our story for the children told. There is a twelfth century manuscript that tells the story of Amleth, crown prince of the Danes. He pilgrimaged into the forest with his friends for a year and dressed in leaves and lived on roots, acorns, and wild fruit. Charles VI of France was known to dress as a Wild Man and led wild romps with his friends through the streets of Paris. Once when Elizabeth I was at the castle of Kenilworth, "on the X (10th) of Julee, (1575) met her in the forest as she came hunting, one clade like a savage man all in ivie."

It is thought perhaps the Green Man was originally Amaethon, the Celtic god of vegetation, the same god known to other cultures by such names as Dionysus, Osiris, and Gilgamesh. But certainly many of the churches and cathedrals that I visited in England had the image of the green man carved into the rafters of their sanctuaries. Usually the image is so high up that from the floor of the structure the green man is not discernible, but maybe this is deliberate also. There is nothing about the ancient religious structures of Europe that is not deliberate.

Maybe our ancient forbearers were just hedging their bets, that is, they would accept the god of Christianity but not at the expense of leaving the reality of the Wheel of the Year. For up to the present the wheel of the year, the cycle of the seasons had the most important impact on the survival of human society.

But the green man goes beyond just Northern Europe. In the Mediterranean area there was the god Bacchus or the God of Wine who in his mythology was reborn three times.

Once again his image is of primeval wildness that is necessary to bring certain knowledge to the cultured of the Roman or Greek civilization. Even the ancient Aztecs have a wild green man in their folklore as does our images of the Sasquatch from the original peoples of our northwest. The Tibetan people have their image of the abdominal snowman, the Yeti, that comes from a white nature. Robert Bly's Iron John or wild man is another manifestation of the wild man of nature who is necessary to civilize modern man.

I suggest that these images are more than just myth, they are part of our collective human memory that may in part be our genetic memory and what Jung called our collective unconscious, a psychic reality that is part of our DNA. More and more science is finding a psychological predisposition.

Look at how we are drawn to certain myths and practices especially during this season when the cycle of the season is driving the green from outside our homes and gardens. We are decorating our homes with green in our homes. It is the custom I know but much of that custom is ingrained in our nature.

Notice that this is the only season where we cut ivy, holly, pine and bring pieces into our home. Look at the way our sanctuary is decorated today. I have gone on Historic house tours during the Christmas season. Most of the houses used greenery as some sort of decoration for the interior of their houses, Poinsettias with their green leaves and blood red flowers, ivy and fir boughs climbed many a staircase or banister. I even saw an inverted pine tree that formed a chandelier with lights. This was apparently a Victorian decoration. It was not only the color that I believe we are attracted to this Yule season, but the smells of cedar and the log fires. All these images and experiences go back to a more primitive time in our human existence and our feeling of security and safety with the smells and appearance of forest greenery.

Remember your feeling looking at a real fir tree in your house and remember the smells. While some of these feeling may be cultural from our early years certainly I feel some of our drawing toward the greenery this season must be something more powerful.

The greenery as the myth of the Green Knight brings us the hope of the spring, the experiential knowledge that the world will be whole and green again. I remember a line from C.S. Lewis's *Tales of Narnia* which I read to my daughters when they were young in which Lewis describes the world of the white witch as "a place where it is always winter but never Christmas." This is the hope that the Green Knight brings with his ivy, red berries, mistletoe, holly and fir trees, this winter wonderland is just as transient as the summer blossoms and just as necessary for the cycle of life. As further evidence of the prevalence of this image I remember a commercial for deodorant I believe in which figures of women and men who are dressed in skin tight suits of camouflage and seem to disappear into the trees. This makes an impressive commercial because it is archetypical.

Even the second film in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has tree men or trees taking on a personification of humans in the enchanted forest coming to the rescue of humanity and against the ancient evil that would destroy the forest and men. In our culture we have the incredible Green Hulk and the Jolly Green Giant, and as on my tie the Grinch. Even I think some of the cloth we have that is camouflaged is in some way drawing on our unconscious images of the green man.

The picture I brought displays many of the aspects of these green man legends. The artist Richard Redd is a UU who went over to England to specially look at images in churches going back before the Christian era. His art was featured in one issue of the *UU World*. Remember that England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland are perennially green even in the dead of winter. I urge you to look at the different image on the front of the *Bulletin*.

The green man is alive today to remind us that even in our urban existence we need think of our ancient past when we depended upon our relationship with the wheel of the year with our web with the earth.

Today, indeed, the Green Man is recognized as a kind of patron of an ever-growing ecological movement. He is a representative of the ancient rhythms of our natural world harking to a time when humans and animals alike lived in harmony with the rest of creation. By his mere appearance we are called away from the commercial images that abound in modernity.

Modernity's dislocation from our natural self that exists today between our co-inhabitants of this planet began in the Middle Ages, and it is perhaps no surprise to

find the spirit of Winter represented in a Green Knight Myth as offering to play a terrible Midwinter game with all who would oppose the power of the ancient Solstice.

May it be so, in an ever-evolving and never-ending world Amen.