**2016 Winter Solstice History**

The Winter Solstice features the least amount of daylight between sunrise and sunset, or the shortest day of the year. The sun is farthest from the tilting Earth’s celestial equator. The turn solstice means, ‘sun stands still’. The sun appears to halt in its slow journey across the sky and change little in its position on the solstice.

Since ancient times, people have celebrated the solstice and observed it with many different cultural and religious traditions. The Roman Feast of Saturnalia, honoring the God Saturn, was a week long December feast that included the observance of Winter Solstice. Romans also celebrated the lengthening of days that occurs after the solstice b honoring Mithras, the ancient Persian God of light.

Other festivals of light reborn in darkness are Hanukah, Yule, and Kwanzaa. One each day of Hanukah and Kwanzaa a new candle is lit and blessings are recited. Other ancient celebrations include La Posadas and St. Lucia’s Day.

Christmas was first celebrated on January 6th, about 350 years after the birth of Jesus. Then in 450 CE, the birthday was moved to Dec. 25th so the new god could partake of the ancient power of the solstice, which is the birth date of the Solar Gods.

On Yule, we honor the goddess, Mother Earth, for giving birth to the sun once more. This marks a time of balance and change for it is the longest night and the shortest day of the year. From this point on the sun rises earlier and earlier, bringing more warmth to the cold and silent days of winter.

Customs originating from pagan days include displaying holly, ivy and pine boughs in the home and lighting trees. The Celts hung glass bowls and candles inside on their Yule trees. These are called fairy lights. They are said to please the fairies and attract them. Each light on the tree is said to represent the beating of a fairy’s heart.

The Yule log is a symbol of the return of the newborn sun. The Feast of Juul was observed in Scandinavia as a pre-Christian festival. Fires were lit to symbolize the heat, and life giving properties. The log was brought in and burned on the hearth in honor of Thor, the Scandinavian god.

In England, Germany, France and other European countries, the log was burned until nothing but ash remained. The ashes were collected and either strewn on the fields as fertilizer every night until the 12th night or kept as a charm or as a medicine. French peasants believed if you kept the ashes under the bed, they would protect the house against thunder and lightning.

In Poland, the solstice was observed prior to Christianity and involved people showing forgiveness and sharing food. It continues to this day and is known as “Gody”.

In Iran, the beginning of winter is celebrated with the reading of poetry and eating pomegranates. In Guatemala, the flying pole dance, where 3 men climb to the top of a 50 foot tall pole and perform a risky dance to flutes and drums.

Evergreen trees-the tree of Life: To the ancient Greeks, the fir tree was the symbol of Artemis, the Moon Goddess who presides over childbirth. She carries a pine cone tipped wand. The earliest trees were decorated with actual fruits and nuts, pine cones and candles. Later cookies and confections were added. In the late 1800’s, blown glass ornaments were made in Germany. The first one was blown into a gingerbread mold, made into the shape of a pine cone, symbol of Artemis, Goddess of Rebirth.

The decorated trees remind us (with fruits, nuts and flowers, to bring about the return of spring and fertility, warmth and light, maintain the balance between darkness and light, coldness and warmth, and the cycles of death and rebirth. Yule means “the wheel”.

Let this time remind us that the return of the sun signifies **Us** emerging from the womb, and rebirth. We are not human do-ings, we are new Be-ings. As we celebrate Winter Solstice, remember that we are here to bring light into Gaia.