

## A deeper look at the definition of the winter solstice

It started when I got to wondering what day the winter solstice fell on this year.

Being, in the modern way, too lazy to get up and look at a calendar, I just Googled it. What I found included some interesting facts, a bunch of misinformation and a lot of really sloppy writing.

First, some of the facts. The solstice, the time when Earth's northern hemisphere is as far away from the sun as it gets all year, came at 11:11 a.m. Saturday. The solstice, which scientists describe as a "singular event," just happens; the sun appears to be moving farther south and lower in the sky each day until it stops and starts, ever so slowly, to go the other way.

This happens because the Earth's rotational axis is tilted about 23 degrees. In the summer, the northern hemisphere is tilted toward the sun, in the winter, away. The equinoxes are the instants when the relative movement reverses.

One article I found (names are being omitted to protect the guilty) calls the equinox "the official beginning of winter." That's bull, as a couple of others point out. Firstly, winter does not recognize any "official" status; it comes when it will.

And meteorologists generally define winter, in terms of weather, as roughly Dec. 1 to March 1. Dec. 21 (or sometimes, Dec. 22) may be the shortest day of the year, but it's seldom the coldest. That happens, the National Weather Service says, because even though days start to get longer, the Earth is losing more heat than it gains for some weeks before things start to warm up. The "middle" of winter still comes some time in January.

Writers seem to have a lot of trouble accurately describing what happens. Saturday, a couple of articles report, we had about 9 hours, 32 minutes of daylight in the "continental U.S." Of course, the actual time varies from south to north. Go far enough north in Alaska, and there was no sunrise at all. Closer to the equator, the length of days is more constant.

Oh, and in this area, the calculated times Saturday were 8 a.m. and 5:20 p.m., 9 hours and 40 minutes of daylight.

Several describe the sun as "moving south" or "turning around in the sky" until it is "straight overhead," but of course, we know the sun is not moving relative to earth. Galileo figured that out a few centuries ago. It's the Earth that moves relative to the sun. From here, it just looks like the sun "moves."

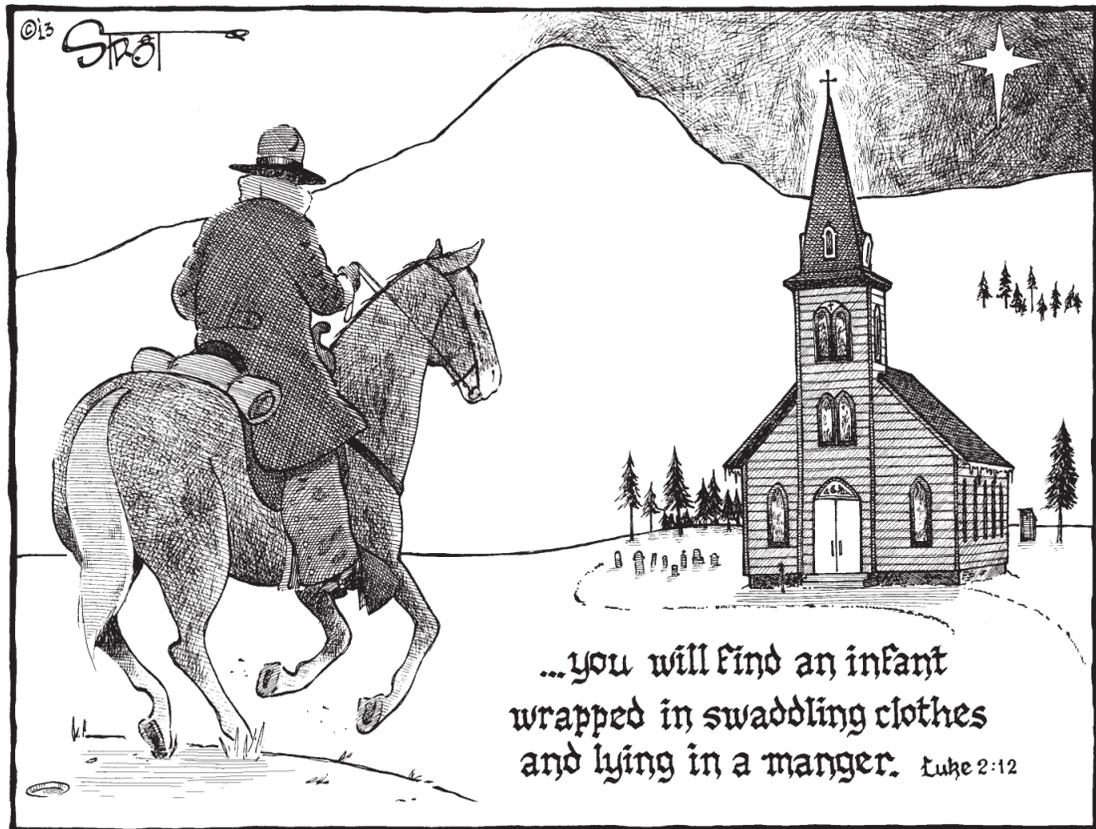
That's because, as the Earth revolves in its orbit around the sun, the axis continues to point the same direction, exposing the northern or southern hemispheres to more or less light and heat in each season. If the axis stayed constant in relation to the sun, one half might have winter all year and the other a long, hot summer.

As it is, we get variety in our weather in the temperate zones, everything north and south of the tropics. It's a nice thing, though I personally could use a little more summer and a little less winter. With global warming, that may be coming, and it might not be so nice, but I'm willing to give it a try.

Oh, and one more little fact. While the days may be getting longer, the sun won't start coming up any earlier for a while. Sunrise will continue to be later for a month while sunsets come later still. That will change in early January, but sunrise won't get back before 8 a.m. until Jan. 21, a full month later, at least out here.

Me, I'm just glad the days will be a little longer for the next six months. I can't wait for the spring equinox, when day and night finally are equal and spring officially begins. OK, that's not true; spring weather usually starts about March 1 - if you remember that March is a spring month as November is a fall month. Still, I'll be ready by then.

### Along the Sappa Steve Haynes



## Where do we draw the line

The recent account of Texas youth Ethan Couch and a defense called affluenza has generated much conversation and controversy. The 16 year old intoxicated driver killed four people and his attorney blamed it on being raised in an affluent, no boundary environment.

The sentence raises many questions, such as the disparity of the have and have not; how to hold parents accountable; is the purpose of our justice system to punish or rehabilitate and how do we determine who is a candidate for rehabilitation? In this case, we must ask, does this boy have what it takes to turn his life around and is there reason to believe he will? How will he cope with the knowledge he killed four people and seriously injured two of his friends?

Not knowing the family background makes it difficult to make these determinations, but the judge's decision was based on this knowledge. Supposedly the boy had been given a DUI one oth-

### Phase II Mary Kay Woodyard



er time, so his underage drinking and driving (15 at the time) was not an unknown occurrence.

Why did the judge choose to give the youth probation rather than prison time? One can only surmise what the reasoning was, but I would assume she believed he was a candidate for rehabilitation. If he had been sentenced to the maximum 20 years in prison, upon release, the result would be a hard core criminal; a hard core criminal with money. Instead, he was given 10 years probation and treatment in a long term alcohol treatment center, at his father's expense. A posh expensive facility has been selected, which perhaps isn't the

best choice. Now might be a good time to introduce the young man to real life. In addition, I would hope his sentence includes no driving and a monitoring device for enforcement, community service with appropriate relationships to his crime and on going counseling.

If affluenza is, in fact, a defense, then the parents must be held accountable as well, but where do we draw the line? We are all a product of our environment and countless other influences. We have all witnessed those parents who provide no boundaries for children, yet not all of those children end up in trouble with the law and vice versa.

This type of defense is bound to open the proverbial can of worms. All research and parenting experiences show us physical punishment does little to prevent poor behavior and yet are all people capable of being rehabilitated? One can only begin to imagine what the future will hold with this type of defense. mkwoodyard@ruraltel.net

## Christmas is not your birthday, Jesus suffered too

A friend tells us she had a difficult time reconciling her feelings about her birthday for many years as her father died on her December birthday. I found myself in tears.

My mother died in December also, five days after my birthday. Overall it was not a very cheery season. My mother was ill for many years. That last December was particularly trying. On the first weekend of deer season, there was a crisis with mom, so I left Kate and Elizabeth at a neighbor's. I returned to discover her husband had shot Dasher or Dancer (or maybe it was Rudolph) and hung the carcass in a tree in front of the picture window to chill.

I focus on the prior year. Mom made divinity, a family favorite and brought the candy and outdoor decorations they had displayed at their house to us. I treasure the gift of something she could do and something she wanted me to have!

At her funeral the minister, Mike Obenauer, suggested ways to ease the pain of our loss. He said, "If Edna loved Christmas, and I went through too many Christmases with her to not know that she did, then make this Christmas a true celebration of that which the Christ Child came to show."

Jane Kersenbrock, recommended a book to me: "Christmas Is Not Your Birthday" by Mike Slaughter.

### This Too Shall Pass Nancy Hagman



Slaughter advises, "So, when Christmas comes around during an imperfect season of life, and you just don't feel like celebrating, remember: it's not your birthday; it's Jesus's birthday, and by celebrating Christmas, we are celebrating someone else who suffered, too."

He talks about our expectations. What does God look like? "Artists have attempted to depict God's image in countless ways throughout the millennia, whereas others have deemed it blasphemous to do so."

Our ideas of Jesus' appearance evolve. I think Jesus looked like me. What I mean is he was human. He was ordinary. He had 10 fingers and 10 toes; a heart and a mind and a soul. He was like me and you.

I believe this is why his ministry was successful. Why it has remained a constant in the lives of so many for so long.

God's aim in sending His Son to live among us was so that He might under-

stand the trials His people face. His Son was not spared.

The Statement of Faith used by the United Church of Christ, the church of my youth, says "You (God) call us into Your Church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship."

Think of the life of Jesus. There are stories of His suffering and temptations, He was vilified, hated and misunderstood. He was a man of sorrows. Where are the stories of joy?

Is it in Grace?

Sometimes think I know the truth. But I am still searching. I am suspicious of anyone who claims to know.

Nothing on Earth is perfect. There is cost and joy!

Matthew 11:30: "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Nonetheless there is a yoke. There is a burden.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Christmas is not your birthday. God is not Santa Claus. The gift He gave us requires action on our part. Jesus set forth the way, we choose to follow it, or not.

I hope you had a blessed Christmas. Pray for those who are struggling, remembering Jesus suffered also. He was and is: God with us. Immanuel.

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