

The God of Winter

A sermon on Mark 5:21-43; 2 Samuel 1:17-27 & Psalm 130 by Nathan Nettleton, 27 June 2021

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Message

The experience of winter is God's gift, inviting us to silence, healing and new depth of life.

Sermon

I like to spend some time each winter skiing at Mount Hotham or at Falls Creek in the Victorian high country. Spending time in the snow fields is certainly a good way to ensure a full experience of the feeling of winter. But, at the same time, it is an unusual place to experience winter, because most of the people there feel very differently about winter than most people elsewhere.

There are people up there who just live for the winters. They love it. The bracing feeling of sub-zero air snapping at the back of the nostrils fills them with a sense of enormous anticipation. Some of them even follow the winters around from southern hemisphere to northern and back. I met one bloke up there who has had eleven winters in a row. COVID lockdowns have probably forced some unwelcome summers on these people.

I met another bloke who lives in Adelaide and works in Australia's biggest refrigerator. It's an indoor ski slope inside a \$9M refrigerator. For these people, and there's thousands of them, the most important activities in their lives depend on bitingly cold winters and plenty of precipitation. I'm not as addicted to it as most of them, but I get it. I'm spending this week down on the Great Ocean Road, and I much prefer it down here in winter watching the storms sweep across the rugged coast than getting sunburn and sand in your bathers in summer.

Most people though don't enjoy the experience of winter as much as me. Most people seem to regard winter as a dreary, miserable time, a time to be endured through long chilly nights and short damp gloomy days until finally spring restores our hope in the world. Well those of you who feel that way will be happy to know that we have just passed the winter solstice, so the days are now getting longer again and we are working our way back towards spring.

Today, though, I want to explore with you the experience and feelings of winter, and see whether it has anything positive to offer. Especially whether it has anything positive to offer to those who don't ski and don't follow football!

Why is it that in the Genesis creation story, when it tells us that in the fourth round of creation God created lights in the skies marking the days and years and seasons, God saw it and said that it was good? Why is the separation of the seasons commended to us by the creator? Let me assure you that if Barnaby Joyce and his ilk lead us all into a climate apocalypse that destroys the God-given separation and cycle of the seasons, you won't be enjoying eternal summer as much as the beach bums might think.

If winter too is part of God's gift to us, then can we perhaps encounter God in the experience of winter in ways which will lead us to newness and fulness of life.

The feelings that most people have about winter are very like the feelings we have about a number of other experiences in our lives. In our reading from 2nd Samuel we hear of David's grief over the deaths of his soul-mate Jonathan and of King Saul. The death of a loved one is an experience that can make our world feel like a cold and desolate place. Winds of despair howl around us, tears are like repeated showers of cold rain, everything is bleak and grey. David wishes the place of the deaths to be barren and lifeless, the very climate and season reflecting the emotion of the event.

Jairus too, in our gospel reading, goes through a winter-like run of emotions. His daughter is at the point of death. He can feel the icy grip of the grave closing around his family. Hope is freezing over and the gloom is descending. He is desperate for a ray of sunshine to penetrate the darkness, desperate for some sign of renewal as he watches the last leaves fall from the tree of life. Like our psalmist he desperately waits for the Lord, waiting, hoping, pleading, longing, like an insomniac longing for the morning, like many of us longing for the first signs of spring. Can life survive long enough for the spring thaw? Will the sun come before it's too late?

The unnamed woman with the bleeding also knew the feeling of long long term winter. She has had a messed up menstrual cycle for twelve years, a problem that not only made her feel weak and miserable, but under the Jewish law made her a social outcast. Anyone who had come into contact with her for the last twelve years was made ritually unclean and had to self-isolate for several days. She was frozen out of society. She felt constantly drained and lethargic, and the misery of loneliness soaked into her soul like driven rain.

Many people found the experience of the COVID lockdowns to be like this too, and not just because the heaviest lockdowns happened in mid winter. I first thought that winter would make it better, not worse, because if going outside wasn't very inviting anyway, then we wouldn't feel so bad about not being allowed to go outside. But I was wrong. It didn't really work that way. For most people, depression about the lockdowns just layered on top of depression about the gloomy weather, and dampened their spirits even more. There was a deep desperate longing for an end to this enforced hibernation, but as the chill winds of despair cut through we just felt powerless to do any more than hug our arms to our chests and blow into our hands.

"Where is God?" we wondered. Has the spirit of God been withdrawn to let life slowly slip away? Where is the path of faith in the midst of the gloom and the biting cold?

If you were to listen to the way many churches talk, or to read many Christian song books, you would think that perhaps the way of faith was to crank up the central heating and walk around in our bathers and sun hats. There is an extraordinary focus on the bright, the cheery, and the fruitful. It is a focus that does not do justice to our full experience of life; it is not true to our experience of the full cycle of the seasons.

It is also not true to the example of Jesus. He was not one who suppressed his tears and insisted that we all think happy thoughts. Jesus's response to the woman with the bleeding seemed almost morbid. Instead of allowing her to slip back into the crowd and rejoice in her healing, Jesus forces her out into the open, in front of the icy stare of a disapproving crowd. He pushes her to give a public description of her pain and misery and suffering. Before she is given the words of healing and acceptance, she is required to openly and publicly embrace the darkness that has frozen her out for so long.

David too, could have easily found cause for celebration in the situation that faced him. Saul, who had been trying to kill him, was now dead. The danger was gone, and so was the only obstacle between David and the throne. The path was now open for the ambitious young warrior to claim the crown and reign over all Israel. More than enough, you would think, to outweigh the sorrow of the moment. But David chooses to embrace the pain. To allow full expression to the anguish he has felt over the king's demise, and even more to the devastation he feels at the death of his beloved friend Jonathan.

Why this insistence from both Jesus and David on entering into, some would say even wallowing in, the pain and icy darkness of these tragedies? Why not hasten the arrival of spring and get the winter behind us as quickly as possible?

Is it not because we need to live fully into the pain before healing can come? You don't need to be much of a student of psychology to have heard that if we accept and explore and express our emotional hurts we will often find healing, but if we deny them we suppress them and they slowly poison us from within. Jesus pushes the woman to an open confession of her darkness so that it can be owned and accepted and dissipated as the light of new life comes. Michael Leunig speaks in one of his prayers of the hope that people will embrace their sadness lest it turn to despair.

You see there is a difference between embracing it and wallowing in it. Wallowing in it denies the next change of season. Wallowing in it wants to hold on to the winter even when the spring comes. Embracing it lives it to the full but lets it pass naturally as the season runs its course.

The embrace of our experience of winter can actually be a place of discovery and hope. We can discover a depth in the experience that we never knew could be there. If we will embrace the winter instead of fleeing it we may discover in the absence of summer's birdsong and teeming life, the mystical beauty of silence and stillness.

As the cold and damp drives us indoors, we discover the comfort and the delight of open fires and mulled wine and intimate company, the pleasures of which are enhanced rather than threatened by the sound of rain on the roof. There are very few things that can surpass the magical beauty of soft snow falling in an alpine eucalypt forest, but it will lose its magic very quickly if you're wearing bathers and trying to play beach volleyball.

It is as we live fully into the experience of our winters that spring comes around. Our psalmist spoke of God's great power to redeem and we see it symbolised in spring's great power to thaw out and dry out the frozen and sodden earth after winter's cold dark months. I find myself fascinated by the power of resurrection at work in the high country, as plants that have been entombed in packed ice for four months or more, break through again and flower and flourish, renewing the frozen and barren wastelands. Only a little less dramatic is the new budding of trees that have looked dead for months, the renewal of leaves and flowers and colours and life. Like Jairus' daughter, the seed of life has lain dormant awaiting the touch of the sun to reawaken it and raise it to new life.

We too, can emerge from our hibernation beneath doonas and around fireplaces, and discover again the new joys of spring with its cascade of colours and aromas and musical

sounds. God has set in place this wonderful cycle of seasons for us, this cycle which mirrors the cycles of our lives and calls us to live fully into each of its phases. God calls us to embrace the fullness of each season and to allow each to flow naturally into the next. Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full. The abundant life never denies its own cycles - it is a passionate life, a life of both deep joys and deep sorrows. The abundant life feels the pain as each sparrow falls to the ground, and celebrates the resurrection of each budding flower in the spring. The abundant life knows the biting cold but finds it enhances the pleasure of open fires.

Our God does not ask us to find in the resurrection a chance to deny the experience of death. Instead God asks us to find the joy of the resurrection deeply rooted in the painful anguished experience of death. We are not encouraged to flee from unpleasant experience or painful emotion, but to drink them full, to explore their depth, to embrace them as our fellow travellers and to allow them to pass with the turning of the seasons.

God does not call us to flee the experience of winter, but to allow the experience of winter to draw us inside, to discover the quiet places of beauty within us, to snuggle close into the warmth of God's loving embrace, and to discover deep within the seeds of new life that will soon blossom forth into new hope and new opportunity as the seasons change and the time of renewal comes.

I want to conclude with a prayer. It is one of Michael Leunig's prayers and it captures the spirit of what we're saying with his usual quirky simplicity.

Let's pray:

We give thanks for the blessing of winter:
Season to cherish the heart.
To make warmth and quiet for the heart.
To make soups and broths for the heart.
To cook for the heart and read for the heart.
To curl up softly and nestle with the heart.
To sleep deeply and gently at one with the heart.
To dream with the heart.
To spend time with the heart.
A long, long time of peace with the heart.
We give thanks for the blessing of winter:
Season to cherish the heart.
Amen.