

181209 Sermon

As many of you know I grew up in Northern California in the San Francisco Bay area. And Not only did I grow up there but so did the preceding generations since I was part of the fifth generation of my family to live in California. I tell you this not to boast but rather to give you some context because although I had seen snow and been in snow before moving to upstate NY I really had no understanding of Winter real deep Winter.

My childhood winters were filled with rain – a lot of rain and it did drop down to freezing every now and again. And the days were shorter but it is not the same as here. I did a little research on this at the Winter solstice my hometown in California has a day that is about ½ hour longer than here. It doesn't seem like much but we all have the lived experience of knowing how dark it is in midwinter here. It is not uncommon for any of us to go to work in the dark or as least at sunrise and go home at sunset if not in the dark.

There is a little balance in the universe. At the summer solstice our daylight is ½ hour longer than the town I grew up in.

we are known here in CNY to grumble and groan about the weather – who wouldn't its human nature. But we are made of tough stock. And we do somehow find our way through. Each of us has our own way of getting through. Some of us hunker down and do a modified hibernating – watching more TV going to bed earlier, some of us throw ourselves into it – skiing or sledding, ice skating or snowshoeing, some of us simply increase our anti-depressants.

Any of those can be good practical ways of getting through the winter. But they are just that getting through the winter. I want to suggest something different I want to reach back and draw from the wisdom of our ancestors about how to make this winter and any winter better. How to make room for the mystery even in the midst of deepest winter.

In a book, entitled “All Creation Waits: An Advent Mystery of New Beginnings” by Gayle Boss the author points to the pre-Christian roots of the season of Advent:

“I learned that the roots of Advent run deep beneath the Christian church—in the earth and its seasons. Late autumn, in the northern hemisphere, brings the end of the growing season. When early agricultural peoples had harvested their crops and stacked food in their larders, they gave a collective sigh of relief. Their long days in the fields were over. For their labor they had heaps of fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat. The group body called out, Feast! At the same time, no matter how glad the party, they couldn't keep from glancing at the sky. Their growing season was over because the sun had retreated too far south to keep the crops alive. Each day throughout the fall they watched the light dwindle, felt the warmth weaken. It made them anxious, edgy. Their fires were no substitute for the sun. When they had eaten up the crop they were feasting on, how would another crop grow? Throughout December, as the sun sank and

sank to its lowest point on their horizon, they felt the shadow of primal fear—fear for survival—crouching over them. They were feasting, and they were fearful, both. Yes, last year the sun had returned to their sky. But what if, this year, it didn't? Despite their collective memory, people wedded, bodily, to the earth couldn't help asking the question. Their bodies, in the present tense, asked the question."

Most cultures have some kind of mid-winter holiday even though it may not be in December. Australia's winter solstice is in June usually the 21st. On the opposite side of the globe from us their seasons are reversed from ours.

One of the things I realized in reading Boss's book is that we can look at winter as this time that is to be struggled with and suffered through or we can take a lesson from our ancestors. When the harvest is over, when the food has been put up, or stored in the cellar, when the winter wood has been stacked, the long work days of summer are over. These long nights of winter and short days mean it is a time to rest. Our bodies know this.

Some of our tiredness, some of our sadness is I think our bodies saying it is time to rest. We are the only animal silly enough to invent the electric light bulb and then believe that we have solved the problem of winter. We can view winter as a problem to be solved or we can view it as a time to reconnect with ourselves and with the divine.

Our American culture tells us this is a time for parties, and eating and drinking and sugar galore. Conservative Christians will tell you the Jesus is the reason for the season – which any good capitalist will know is wrong. The economy seems to be the reason for the season at this point – at least if you look at the circulars you get in the mail or the ads on TV.

But our ancestors know differently. They knew it was about survival and the mysterious ways that life moves forward. Gayle Boss goes on to write:

"To be sure, some part of "the holiday season" is celebration of the harvest, for us, as it was for our ancestors, even if our personal harvest doesn't involve crops and barns. We throw a party to mark the end of another year and all it has brought. We do this in a big, bright, loud way. But for us also, as for our ancestors, the dark end of the year brings unrest. It is an end. It comes without our asking and makes plain how little of life's course we control. This uncertainty, we don't know how to mark. And so, it marks us. We feel weighted, gloomy even, and we feel guilty because voices everywhere in myriad ways sing out, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year." The church history book that got hold of me told me that my own annual December sadness was no reason for guilt. It was a sign of being wide awake in the world, awake enough to sense loss. And furthermore, there was a way to engage that sadness. That way was Advent. The early Fathers of the Christian church read the ebbing of light and heat and vegetable life each year as a foreshadowing of the time when life as we know it will end completely. That it will end is the rock-bottom truth we sense deep in our primal bones every

December, and it rightly terrifies us. To their and our abiding fear of a dark ending, the church spoke of an adventus: a coming. Faith proclaimed, when life as we know it goes, this year and at the end of all years, one comes, and comes bringing a new beginning.

Boss, Gayle. All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings (Kindle Locations 97-101). Paraclete Press. Kindle Edition.

Not all of us are Christian and not all of us recognize or practice Advent and I am not saying that you should take up that practice if it does not fit your faith. What I am saying is that our ancestors had some wisdom. Winter as sad making as it is, provides us with a pause.

“Advent, to the Church Fathers, was the right naming of the season when light and life are fading. They urged the faithful to set aside four weeks to fast, give, and pray—all ways to strip down, to let the bared soul recall what it knows beneath its fear of the dark,”

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Originally Advent was not a time of festivity it was a time of preparation of paring down, of time and space made to reflect on the divine. I also suspect there was something incredibly practical about that. If you have a limited amount of food and supplies to get you through the winter and you take 4 weeks and call it a time of fasting – the food will stretch further.

I know and you know and our ancestors knew that there is mystery in this world. Some of it is simply that which we don't know yet, or which we do not understand yet. But much of it is divine mystery. The ebb and flow of the seasons, the divine push to affirm life at every turn, the divine love that courses through this creation. No matter what we do we cannot stop that love and that is a divine mystery that is important to open ourselves to at this time of year

When you get into a mindset that winter is something to be struggled though you lose an opportunity. When you take your lead from nature and use winter as a pause you can get proximal to the divine.

Winter provides us a natural space for sitting with the mystery of the universe.

So, if you find yourself with lower energy and a lower mood, if you can don't spend a lot of time in your head berating yourself for not feeling cheerier. I would say you are experiencing some spiritual depth. Your body is telling you to slow down. Curl up under that comforter, grab a hot beverage spend some time pondering the snow. Look at the beauty of it look at how it exquisitely outlines each tree branch or those three leaves that never fell last fall. If you have a bit of yard or land around where you live

look for the tracks of animals. Every winter I am astounded at the number of bunny prints in my backyard. In the summer I can't see that.

This is the time of year to slow down. Let your heart ponder what this turning of the seasons means. We who believe we can control so much – at this time of the year we come face to face with how much we cannot control. My relatives in California get faced with that through earthquakes and fires – horrible, horrible disasters. We get to practice this each year in a way that is somewhat predictable and slower more forgiving and there is grace in that.

Every so often here in CNY some things coincide, a clear sky, snow covered ground and full moon. The moonlight will light up the snow in the most beautiful of ways. I believe the next full moon is December 22 if the clouds part enjoy the moonlight that night and you don't even have to stay up that late to see it!

Spend your longest night and your shortest day pondering how this past year went for you and how you might like to see the new year dawn. What will you do with all that sunlight come this June. Spend some time reflecting on the gifts you have received in this life not just the gifts you will be giving. Make a list of gratitudes and look at it when the snow and the grey seem too deep.

We don't really need to make room for the mystery it is all around us all the time. We, and by we I probably mean me, need to slow down take a breath, look around, and appreciate the mystery in all its manifestations.

In a world without end may this be so.