



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

LISTENING IN THE SNOW
Following a snow storm in Aurora

January 12, 2014

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of God's name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.

The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

"The Snow Man" Wallace Stevens

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Following the snow storm this past week, and the resulting mounds of the white stuff piled high at every corner, several poems have been rattling around in my brain since Jim Heup and I talked about them last Sunday. Believing that God is not static, stuck exclusively between the pages of ancient scriptures, I often find insight into the divine through the words of poets. Here is inspiration as powerful as any scripture passage for me, and the several poems I have chosen to correspond to the lectionary reading in Psalm 29 are replete with thoughts that edify the mind and spirit. They reiterate the value of mindful living in the context of Jesus's teachings.

The first is found in Wallace Stevens's poem "The Snow Man." The first line is a sermon unto itself. "One must have a mind of winter." One must have the mind of winter to regard the cold and snow with any reverence; one must have the mind of winter and be cold a long time in order to avoid imposing any misery in the sound of the wind. The context of life is important. One must have the mind of winter to regard the cold, blowing wind as something more than the personal burden it creates when we don't have the mind of winter.

In the same way, one must have the mind of a child to empathize with their perspective, always having to look up to talk to adults, of not understanding that parents have to sometimes do things for their good that the child doesn't like. One must have the mind of someone who is hungry to know what it really means to say "I'm starving" or to walk in someone else's shoes to know why they act or respond the way they do. How much more positive the world would be if, before we complain, we would have the mind of winter, the mind of a child or a hungry person.

What the poet is asking is whether one can be cold enough to know the beauty of nature without imposing our own values of misery to it. Misery is a human word that says nothing about nature and everything about us. We might choose to be miserable because of the snow but that does not make the snow a miserable event. If we have the mind of winter, we can see something beautiful in it. It is a matter of perspective, an attitude that can, as the final lines of the poem suggest, be reached. To behold nothing that is **not** there is to behold reality stripped of all that we humans might attribute to it. Since misery is not part of nature but a human lens through which we see it, to behold nothing that is not there suggests that it is possible to find beauty in the snow and wind if we are of the mind to do so.

The Psalmist reminds us that the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire and shakes the wilderness and strips the forest bare but when one has the mind of God's nature we can say "glory be to God." What we are asked to do in nature, God asks us to do with human nature. It is too easy to impose upon others the value systems that order our own lives, measuring others' behavior by our standards which we automatically assume are God's standards.

The Listener who listens in the snow, who gets outside of self, beholds nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. In good Zen fashion, here is nothing that is both full and empty at the same time. The double-negative plays tricks with the mind but conjures up the playful imagination. There are two worlds available to us: that which is known to sense perception, what we see, and feel, and smell and hear. But there's another world that is not available to the sense perception: the world of the imagination. It is tempting in our modern world to judge as real only that which we can see and touch; that which is in our imagination is just as real, though in a different way.

Imagination is redemptive. When we're up against a seemingly unsolvable problem, the imagination spurs us to think outside the box. When we're oppressed or depressed by all that weighs us down, our imagination rescues us with fantasies and dreams that may or may not become reality but which, for the moment, lift us from our present rut. Too much reality can kill our spirit; God instills within each of us the imagination to hear God's voice of hope and joy in things beyond the tangible.

The short Robert Frost poem "Dust of Snow" illustrates the power of imagination in reframing an otherwise miserable situation. Do you remember how irritating it is to have snow go down the back of your neck when you throw a shovel full out of the driveway? Frost upends it:

*The way a crow shook down on me the dust of snow from a hemlock tree
Has given my heart a change of mood and saved some part of a day I had rued.*

A black, ugly, ordinary crow shakes from the hemlock death tree, a dust of snow that irritates but which also becomes the very thing that inspires, saving the day, giving a change of heart. One must have a mind, not only of winter, but of the humor of God to save a day that seemed lost with a pile of snow in one's face. The voice of the Lord in the wilderness is the voice that can turn things around if we will but listen with the imagination. God is still speaking, and sometimes it is through black crows and dusts of snow.

The second expression of mindful living is found in Billy Collins's "Shoveling Snow with the Buddha." (The full poem is printed below)

*...here we are, working our way down the driveway,
one shovelful at a time.
We toss the light powder into the clear air.
We feel the cold mist on our faces.
And with every heave we disappear
and become lost to each other
in these sudden clouds of our own making,
these fountain-bursts of snow.*

*This is so much better than a sermon in church,
I say out loud, but Buddha keeps on shoveling.
This is the true religion, the religion of snow,
and sunlight and winter geese barking in the sky,
I say, but he is too busy to hear me.*

*He has thrown himself into shoveling snow
as if it were the purpose of existence,*

Here we are reminded that the real work of faith, espoused by the Buddha—and Jesus—is in the normal, daily, routine activities of life. The human in this poem wants to put a label on what is religion, wants to assess what is good and what is not, wants to put value systems on what is being done, but the Buddha simply keeps shoveling until the human realizes that shoveling snow IS the work of faith, the true religion.

Here we are encouraged to move beyond correct doctrines and nitpicking theologies to embrace a faith that is realized in the practical experience of finding God in the ordinary. When there's snow to shovel, will we complain about it or see it as a spiritual adventure? Do we shovel the snow just to get it done or can we have the mind of winter, or the mind of the Buddha, the mind of God, to find in the ordinary the extraordinary? As that insightful theologian Mary Poppins says: with every job that must be done there is an element of fun. It might be so much better than listening to a sermon, for this is the true religion, the religion of snow.

*One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;*

*And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter*

*Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,*

*Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place*

*For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

*The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.*

May God give us wisdom to be keen and faithful listeners in the snow. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

“Shoveling Snow with the Buddha”
Billy Collins

In the usual iconography of the temple or the local Wok
you would never see him doing such a thing,
tossing the dry snow over a mountain
of his bare, round shoulder,
his hair tied in a knot,
a model of concentration.

Sitting is more his speed, if that is the word
for what he does, or does not do.

Even the season is wrong for him.
In all his manifestations, is it not warm or slightly humid?
Is this not implied by his serene expression,
that smile so wide it wraps itself around the waist of the universe?

But here we are, working our way down the driveway,
one shovelful at a time.
We toss the light powder into the clear air.
We feel the cold mist on our faces.
And with every heave we disappear
and become lost to each other
in these sudden clouds of our own making,
these fountain-bursts of snow.

This is so much better than a sermon in church,
I say out loud, but Buddha keeps on shoveling.
This is the true religion, the religion of snow,
and sunlight and winter geese barking in the sky,
I say, but he is too busy to hear me.

He has thrown himself into shoveling snow
as if it were the purpose of existence,
as if the sign of a perfect life were a clear driveway
you could back the car down easily
and drive off into the vanities of the world
with a broken heater fan and a song on the radio.

All morning long we work side by side,
me with my commentary
and he inside his generous pocket of silence,
until the hour is nearly noon
and the snow is piled high all around us;
then, I hear him speak.

After this, he asks,
can we go inside and play cards?

Certainly, I reply, and I will heat some milk
and bring cups of hot chocolate to the table
while you shuffle the deck.
and our boots stand dripping by the door.

Aaah, says the Buddha, lifting his eyes
and leaning for a moment on his shovel
before he drives the thin blade again
deep into the glittering white snow.