

Feeling the Cold
First Sunday of Advent - Year B - 01/03/2021
Psalm Reading: Jer. 31:7-14
1st Reading: John 1:1-5, 2nd: Psalm 147:12-20

It is thought that the Psalms were originally written as liturgy for use in the temple in Israel or for use in ceremonial occasions. But there are also dark and personal passages that are hardly likely to have been read in unison by a worshiping community. So many of the psalms were probably poems written for occasions or perhaps just jotted down by a lonely scribe or king sitting among a pile of scrolls.

Though the topics of the psalms can range widely, they do all have one element in common and that is the presence of God. In pretty much all of them, God is a feature, as a powerful director of history, as jealous righteous judge, as creator, as comforter, and even as a force of nature. In the 147th Psalm we see all these aspects of God. This is a psalm that praises God in all God's glory, with verses like, "He builds up Jerusalem", "He heals the broken-hearted." "He determines the number of the stars." "The Lord sustains the humble, but casts the wicked to the ground."

There is such beautiful imagery in this psalm, but for us who live in the frozen north of Michigan, so far north that we can say we are closer to the north pole than the equator, there are verses in this psalm that seem to speak directly to us as we are surrounded by an awesome blanket of white, as we shiver from the freezing temperatures, and tread carefully because of the ever present chance of slipping.

So it is with mixed emotions that we read that God “spreads the snow like wool.” (v.16) Now you can imagine that the Israel of that time when the Psalms were written was very familiar with sheep and wool, and when the time came to shear a flock of sheep, the piles of wool that stacked up must have been reminiscent of drifts of snow. We can think of shepherds in a barn knee deep in the stuff. For the shepherds it was a beautiful sight because selling the wool of the sheep was a primary means of income. So coming out on a winter’s day to a fresh deep snow must have kindled in their hearts some degree of awe and pleasure. I admit that watching the snow come down in large flakes is a pleasure to me, in spite of knowing that heavy doses of the cold white stuff can stifle all human activity. It is quite dangerous to drive on, and it creates a lot of work in clearing paths, driveways and roads. It certainly is a reminder of God’s greatness and power.

And in the 147th Psalm the cold metaphor continues, as we hear that God spreads the frost like ashes. And there is that mixture of beauty and dread in the frost as well, as it leaves its mark on window panes, but can also kill off the last of the tomatoes in the garden in the fall or lay low a line of seedlings freshly planted in the spring.

Then we may read that God “hurls down his hail like pebbles.” (v.17) Pebbles are one thing, but many know from experience that the hail can come down like golf balls and rain destruction upon an exposed vehicle or pedestrian. Have you ever found a hail stone so big you brought it inside and stuck in the freezer just so you could show someone else the awesome wonder of it?

Then the psalmist asks us the crucial question, “Who can withstand his icy blasts?” And we can imagine a walk in the winter-wonderland and how we can feel the cold seep through our coats, pierce through our gloves and shoes and when we return from such a walk, feel as though our toes and fingers are burning from the temperature change. The question the psalmist asks is rhetorical, the answer, after this description of winter is obvious: no one can withstand his mighty blasts!

And that seems to be the point. That God is all powerful. Whatever God wishes to do to us, we must accept as a precondition to our current situation. We cannot stop the snow, we cannot wish the temperatures to warm, we cannot order the hail to cease. And now that we are in the depths of winter we know this, we can see it when we look out the window of our homes or offices. We can see the fluffy, woolly piles grow higher by the day.

But God gives us the wherewithal to deal with winter while it is here, we can put on long underwear, thick woolly socks, hats and coats, scarves and gloves. We heat our homes, and we turn on the heating blankets on our beds at night. But because of the weather, most of us spend more time indoors, secluded from the rest of the world. We go into waiting mode looking for the end of the cold, toward the time that we know Spring will be here. We plan our gardens, we look at new lawn mowers, we think about vacations, and look at the catalogs for new hiking shoes. Because we know God will relent with a change of the season.

And our reading reminds us of this in verse 18. We may read the encouraging words, “He sends his word and melts

them (that is the ice and snow), He stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.” And when this happens we come out from our shelters and start to do all of the things we planned over that long hiatus.

All of this is a lesson to us. It is a lesson we can apply here and now in the midst of this cold winter, and in the midst of the condition in which our society, in fact the world, currently finds itself. It is a lesson we can apply to the church. We are currently under lockdown because of the effects of the Covid-19 virus. It feels like we have been going through the longest winter of our lives. We are secluded, shutting ourselves away, sheltering ourselves from its effects. Which is what we should be doing in the face of the natural force that confronts us. We have been looking out our virtual windows at the landscape of charts and graphs of the effects of the virus that look like snowdrifts, and we wonder when this winter will ever end.

Yes, we have responded to the current condition. We have hunkered down. We have done on-line services. We have worked hard to keep in touch with one another.

Perhaps because I am an optimist, I have been catching whiffs of Spring in the air. Vaccines have been coming out. Better ways of treating the virus are continually being discovered. Society may not get through this winter as quickly as I would like. It will probably be months, if not longer, before community life returns to some semblance of normality.

But normality, what is that? I do not think society nor the church will ever be quite the same again because of our winter experience. Nor should it. I mentioned that one of the things that we do in winter is plan. We get ready for the Springtime.

And we have been doing some planning in the church. But we need to get ready to execute on some of those plans. If we do not start now, then the seeds we sow in our garden in the late spring may never bear fruit.

You know, there is an interesting idea in Verse 16. In the NIV the first phrase is translated “God sends his word” to melt the snow. But a literal translation from the Hebrew is that God sends his “*ruach*”. *Ruach* has many meanings, but one way to read it is that God Breathes on the snow to melt it.¹ It can also mean that God sends the Spirit. I can see merit in all three translations. And why not? The psalmists were noted for filling their writings with double and triple meanings.

Yes, the *ruach* has been melting the snow. I know because I have been reading God’s Word, and I can feel the breath of God on the back of my neck as if I am being closely followed. I know the Spirit is among us, and so I am confident of the spring.

I am praying that you all look outside at the icy world that surrounds us, at the snowdrifts that block our paths, at the broken tree branches lying on the ground from the heavy snows, at the icy walks, and know that under all of that are the seeds that will sprout in the spring.

But for now, as we wait for that spring, we still need to get out our shovels, our snowblowers and bags of salt and keep working to keep what we have going. But more than that, we need to peruse the seed catalogs and order the plants and seeds we want to grow in the spring. We need to be ready and

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, The Writings*, 333.

know, know that God's breath is coming not just to sweep away the snow, but to set our hearts on fire.

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