

“Winter of the Heart”

Preached 3/12/2014 at Trinity Lutheran Church

Focus Texts: Psalm 88 and Ecclesiastes 12:1-8; and chapters 1 and 2 from *Spiritual Rhythm* by Mark Buchanan

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Sisters and brothers of Christ, may the God of all seasons remind us of the hope that is and will be this season of Lent. Amen.

Winter. Winter. Winter.

After the winter we have had here in Wisconsin, I am pretty convinced that I drew the short straw amongst the pastoral staff in drawing this season of the heart. After a long, cold, hard winter, we don't need any prompting to thinking about what winter is like. What it makes us feel. Even those of us who like winter have found ourselves grumbling at the cold these past few months.

Winter. Maybe when we first think of winter, we think of a nice picture like this: A beautiful landscape, of pretty snow. On a snow covered bridge. Peaceful and tranquil.

But then, as winter drags on, these are the images that come to mind. Out go the peaceful and tranquil. In come the wrath of winter. The pain, the headaches, the difficulty, the cold. The potholes. Yes, the potholes. The bane of any car or drivers experience, these pits of dread line our streets, ready to swallow us whole. Gone are the picturesque images of snow covered bridges, replaced with holes filled with water and grossness. As winter drags on, so does our desire for it to get over.

Unless we are the abominable snowman or Elsa from the hit movie Frozen, winter is not something we desire to be around for all time. At least most of us. Winter drains us. Slows us. Freezes us. During winter, we find ourselves longing, and waiting, and hoping.

And so today, as we continue our series on the seasons of the heart, we begin with the season of winter. As Pastor Kurt mentioned last week, the seasons of the heart are not something corresponding with a certain age of our lives. Our hearts experience winter at the ages of 25, 45, and 85. The heart in winter knows no limits to age and experience.

How would you describe the heart in winter? What images, emotions, descriptions would you use to describe what the winter of the heart is like?

Here is a list of some common descriptors of the heart in winter. Bleakness, loneliness, cold, dark, fruitless, inactive, brooding, grief, and bankrupt of any joy, feeling passion, pleasure. You may have other words you would use to describe your winters, but I would guess for most of us the words we use lean more towards the serious and melancholy rather than lighthearted and cheerful.

When we are in winter, these words, and more, dominate the feelings of our heart. They dominate because we are very familiar with winter. We know the feelings that winter brings to our hearts, and we know them well. These are the times that are brought on by unexpected

changes and events, like the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the anxiety of a big transition in life. They can also come around for no reason at all, when life seems like everything is going so well, and then, all of the sudden, we find ourselves in the midst of a winter season in our hearts.

People of faith know winters of the heart, and this has been true for centuries, dating back to the authors and ancestors who wrote our sacred scriptures. We read two of these scriptures today. The first was Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is not exactly a popularly read Psalm. We don't read it at funerals like a certain psalm about a shepherd. But the emotion and honesty and faithfulness from which this Psalm comes speaks to the winter of our hearts. The Psalmist speaks of being overwhelmed with troubles and the feeling that God had abandoned him. In winter, the reality of death and sin are upfront and unavoidable. Raw and powerful and emotional, the Psalm gives words to the struggle and heartache of winter. It closes with the haunting words: darkness is my closest friend." For those who say it is wrong to be angry and frustrated at God, have them read Psalm 88.

The second text we read came from Ecclesiastes 12:1-8. For some reason, these words do not receive the same attention as the passage we read last week from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, about there being a time for everything. For the writer of Ecclesiastes in chapter 12, the time is a time of no pleasure and a lack of meaning. During the winter of the heart, meaning becomes difficult to find, and the author knows this.

Which leaves the question, one that we ask during times of struggle and difficulty and doubt. During times of death. During times of unbearable brokenness. A questions we ask during our winters: Where is God? Does God leave us during winter?

NO! God does not abandon us. God does not leave us. God does not run away to somewhere warmer and more pleasant.

But sometimes it can feel that way. Because that is one of the difficulties of winter. We find it hard to feel God during the winters of our hearts. The cold and dark of winter can make it difficult to see past.

God is in the midst of our winters. God is in the midst of the work and struggle and emotions of winter. How do I know this? We will get there in a minute. But first, I want to focus on the work and opportunities that winter bring to our faith lives. Which seems kind of crazy, when you first hear it, because none of us would choose to be in the winter of our hearts. But the winters of our heart bring about opportunities and work that are able to grow in our faith, and produce fruit in our lives, that would be much more difficult if we did not have a winter season to use in preparation. Just as we use the winter season of our calendars for certain work and preparation in our lives, we use the winter of our hearts for certain work, too.

The first is prayer. When we are in the winters of our hearts, we are driven to prayer. Even in Psalm 88, as everything is going wrong, as he struggles to feel and see God at work in his life, the Psalmist prays. In winter, we walk by faith and not by sight. In winter, while it can be hard to see and feel God, we trust in what the Word of God tells us, that the scriptures tell us that God is good and that God calls us to prayer.

Second, in winter, we prune. We cut back. Winter is a time to step back and ask: what is it that I need to cut back to bring about health and fruitfulness in my life? During a season of low activity and low energy, winter gives us the ability and even the permission to take the time to do some pruning in our lives. What is really important to me? What is important in my relationship with God and those I am closest to?

And finally, the winter of our heart brings about the work of waiting. Now, for those of you who cannot sit still, this may be a difficult one for you. But waiting is truly a spiritual practice and gift. For as we wait, we are giving time for our faith in the God of all seasons to grow. As we wait during winter, we pray, we call out, we open ourselves up to God. We grow in a deep, biblical faith as we place our trust in God. And as we do this, we learn that God is more than subject to circumstances of the moment and how we are feeling, but that God is in those moments and circumstances and feelings. That God transcends all of them. And that God uses the seasons of our lives to bring about fruit, and meaning, and purpose in our lives.

This work of winter prepares and changes us. It creates a new us out of the prayer and pruning and waiting. A new us with a new perspective of heaven and earth. For in the praying, and pruning, and waiting, we inevitably face the reality of death and sin in our lives. And we inevitably ask the questions of God...What takes away the sting of death and sin? What gives us hope in the midst of our winters?

Jesus Christ. Why?

Because Jesus Christ experienced winter, too. Jesus knew what it was like to feel lost, hurting, abandoned. Not only by his closest companions, the disciples, but by God the Father, too. Because Jesus knows sorrow and suffering, Jesus comes closest to us in winter. Because Jesus knows sorrow and suffering, I know that God is right there with us, too.

For In Christ, we can trust and place our hope that our winters are not just pits of darkness. In Christ, we know that our winters will not be forever. In Christ, we know that our winters will come to an end, and that they will produce fruit.

May God bless us and encourage us during our seasons of winter. May God be with us in the work we do during this season of the heart. And may God guide us out of this season, so that we might bear fruit in our faith and our lives. Amen.