

"Into Winter I Must Go" Sermon by Rev. Lori Staubitz

Reading #1

"To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy corrupt power which seems omnipotent;
to love and bear;
to hope till Hope creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
(This, like thy glory, Titan,)
This is to be GOOD, great and Joyous, beautiful and free;
This IS alone Life, Joy, Kingdom and Victory!"

-From "Prometheus Unbound" By Percy Bysshe Shelley

Reading # 2

"I Will Nurture This Autumn" by Wendy Smyer Yu
From Life Prayers; edited by Elizabeth Robers and Elias Amidon

I will nurse this autumn carefully,
Treat its brittleness gently,
Smooth its crumbling edges, its weeping afternoons.

I will rise early and go to it,
Wrap it in a soft cloth
And watch its breathing.

I will nurture this autumn knowing it is myself
In a pure and golden form,
And that childlike
Soft words will be brought bubbling up
To be recorded in the patterns of leaves and the low fog coming across the
bay.

I will accept this death
And be content with its coming and watch
Its coming
And speak of its coming
In slow poems
Until at last
There will be no more words,
You will hear only the sound of rain as you sleep.

Once again the dark days are upon us- but who would know it....the true nature of this season is so easy to miss.

The buzz and business of our seasonal celebrations move us right along from one holiday to the next without pause and without question. We are all caught up in the seamless activity of ensuring that despite the encroaching night...we will be immersed in non-stop glitter and gold, festive lights, joyful music and playful expectation.

There is nothing apparent that speaks to us of the reality of December...the bare bones of lifeless trees, the long darkness of days and the bitterness and bite of icy winds and hard, cold earth. Death and darkness surround us, yet we seem not to have noticed. Perhaps the truth of it is something we as humans strive to ignore. For we have long feared the inevitable coming of winter and turn our backs against the night.

Indeed, most of our mid-winter holidays and festivals have arisen out of our fear of death and deepest desires to connect with the enduring power of life.

Here in the Northern Hemisphere, darkness will reach its zenith on the eve of the winter solstice on Dec. 21st.

Since the dawn of time, people have come together in the darkness to speak of life around the light of the fire. We comfort and encourage one another with the warmth and assurance of feasting and festivities. We speak of light, of hope, of new birth. We decorate with evergreens wreaths-ancient reminders of the cycle of life and it's power of transcendence over death.

1

Don't get me wrong, we need to speak to hope and offer images of renewal in each season, especially here in winter. For we are remiss if we let the human soul succumb to the bitterness and barrenness of our surrounding landscape.

Let us honor the enduring power of light and life. Let our universal messages of hope transcend speak to the whole of humanity. So let us join in festival and song. Let the celebrations begin - but not so quickly as to overlook another essential aspect of this season; one we overlook at our peril.

Let us not wish away this darkness too quickly for in it we may find an even larger sense of connection to the sources of regeneration.

There is a hidden aspect to this dark season that is most final and beautiful that touches something deep in me. For those who have walked in the quiet beauty of snow fall; for those who know the intimate silence and dead calm of the woods in winter; for those who have ventured to

contemplate the reality of death and dying, you too may know that strange gifts can be gleaned in the darkness.

There is something to be found in the silence and the night; something essential to our spiritual development and sense of wholeness and completion. We are not creatures who live upon the earth but within it and we too will have our seasons...and into winter each of us must go.

2

Henry David Thoreau found these words to share about one winter about his life on Walden's Pond

"After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what-how-when and where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight."

Anne Morrow Lindbergh speaks to this quality of experience in her work

"Gifts from the Sea" she writes:

"For a full day and two nights I have been alone...and it seemed to me, separated from my own species, that I was nearer to others...I felt a kind of impersonal kinship with them and a joy in that kinship. Beauty of earth and sea and air meant more to me. I was in harmony with it, melted into the universe, lost in it, as one is lost in a canticle of praise." "I felt closer to my fellow beings too, even in my solitude. For it is not physical solitude that actually separates one from others, not physical isolation but spiritual isolation. " When one is a stranger to oneself, then one is a stranger to others. How often in a large city, shaking hands with my friends, I have felt the wilderness stretching between us. Both of us, wandering in arid wastes, having lost the springs that nourished us- or having found them dry. Only when one is connected to one's own core is one connected to others."

The wintering of the human spirit is as essential to our health and well being.

3

Into winter I must go...We all must make this journey, alone and together.

Our need for wintering goes far beyond any personal desire we may have for a balance of calm and quiet.

If we dare to pause and put our ear to the ground, the message is sound and clear "We too are of the earth,"

As the Psalm reminds us...there is a time for rest and a time for planting, a time to be born and a time to die.

Winter is nigh and this is the season of death.

Mary Oliver shares this openness to the deeper, natural process of regeneration in her poem "Sleeping in the Forest"

I thought the earth remembered me,
She took me back so tenderly,
Arranging her dark skirts, her pockets full of lichens and seeds.
I slept as never before, a stone on the riverbed,
Nothing between me and the white fire of the stars
But my thoughts,
And they floated light as moths among the branches of the perfect trees.
All night the small kingdoms breathing around me, do their work in the darkness.
All night I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling with a luminous doom.
By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better.

4

If we take seasoning seriously, we come to discover that only by honoring the natural processes of restoration and renewal are we able to address our own needs and attend to others.

The implications of balance are essential to personal and family health but the impact this deeper understanding has upon our community, our nation and our interconnections with the sustaining power of life on our planet are profound.

We are not ignorant of, nor are we unaware of the impact endless and unchecked productivity has upon our lives and the quality of life on earth. The evidence surrounds us.

An essay entitled "Power, Authority and Mystery, by Mariam Simose (Starhawk) speaks to an earth based spirituality that is rooted in three concepts; immanence (seeing the sacred within life, not outside of it), interconnection and community.

She writes "Our goal is not to get off the wheel of birth nor to be saved from something. Our deepest experiences are experiences of connection with the Earth and with this world." " I want to explore what it really means to accept the Earth as alive and that we have our part *in this greater life. (adaptation)* "Each of these principals- immanence, interconnection, and community calls us to do something. That call, that challenge is the

difference between a spirituality that is practiced versus an intellectual philosophy."

5

When we slow down our pace of life and balance our action with rest, we acknowledge something essential to our being...we affirm that we, like all of earth's creatures have our limits. Yes, we too will one day lay our tired bodies down upon the earth and give ourselves to the darkness and the night.

"One day some people came to the master and asked 'How can you be happy in a world of such impermanence, where you cannot protect your loved ones from harm, illness and death?' The master held up a glass and said 'Someone gave me this glass, and I really like this glass. It holds my water admirably and it glistens in the sunlight. I touch it and it rings! One day the wind may blow it off the shelf, or my elbow may knock it from the table. I know this glass is already broken, so I enjoy it incredibly.'" [Already Broken: A Buddhist Perspective on the Season of Spring](#) by James Ishmael Ford

Acknowledging the fragile nature of our human experience can engender deeper living. How much we need to free ourselves from an unnatural desire for an endless spring.

6

Charles Dickens gave us some insights into what is needed to embrace the full power of this season.

It isn't until his miserly character Ebenezer Scrooge is compelled to come to terms with suffering and death that he is able to connect fully with life.

Of course this doesn't happen easily for Scrooge. He goes kicking and screaming with each ghostly visitation. He is forced to witness, for the first time, the breadth of joy and suffering in each stage of his life.

Scrooge let his fears prevail. He insulated himself from the reality of death with extreme denial. He avoids pain with preoccupation- as he busies himself by attaining more wealth than he can reasonably enjoy. Money counting is his obsession and distraction. He closes the door on death and he feels safe...However, in his refusal to embrace the harsher realities of life, he also closes the door to joy and meaning.

Scrooge is not alone. Many of us, in our own ways keep ourselves "safe" by keeping "busy. "

For the next few moments, I would like to invite you into a time of stillness and calm as I share a meditation entitled "At Homeness" by Rev. Richard Gilbert.

Be silent, be still, be serene in this house of the spirit.
Put aside all noises that annoy, all sounds that irritate,
The cacophony that confounds
Here you are at home.

Leave behind all the frustration that belittle,
The causes that fret, the troubles that torment.
Here you can be at rest,
Put away all the plans to be made,
Things to be done victories to be won.
Here you are at peace.

Breathe deeply.
Clear the mind of all cluttered thought.
Purge yourself of all unkindness
Rinse the soul clean and pure,
Here you are at home.

Sit easy and be at rest.
Feel your body recover its resilience,
Your mind its bearings, your spirit its strength.
Once again we have come home to the Source.
We feel the collective power of our companions,
The warmth of their welcome,
the support of their caring.
We who have been wanderers, groping for something,
We know not what,
Come home, Here is a place for us.

We are at home in this sanctuary
And with these people
We are at home on this planet
And with all who dwell upon the earth,
We are at home in the universe,
Our home for all times past and all time to come.
*Let us breathe in and release a long sigh of recognition and relief...we
belong here, Here we are at home.*

We belong to the earth and to the earth we will return.

Amen, so may it be.

There is something about stillness we do not trust.
In this culture of youthfulness, longevity and consumption....the wheel
of life is more like a treadmill...moving way too fast.

Winter invites us to contemplate stillness, emptiness and the void.

When we do not stop for rest and renewal, we are in effect avoiding
death and something essential to our humanity is lost
There is power in the wintering of the human spirit. The eternal processes of
renewal is as much at work in the world as they are within us.

So let the holidays begin.....but not without pause, not without some
time for quiet reflection.Let us not wish away the darkness too quickly,
for in it we can connect deeply with our own mortality and our place in the
ongoing cycles of life. In winter we can find strange comfort, peace and
communion . May we rest in the fact that there is a season for everything
under the sun.