

Winterest

Text: Genesis 8:22; Psalm 147

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

February 7, 2016

I am sitting on JetBlue flight 533. It's the usual boarding process as people scrunch oversized-carry-on bags into the bins above. Time to tuck in and get comfortable for the sky-ride from Tampa to Hartford.

A woman settles next to me and we acquaint ourselves with proper distance. "You from down-here or up-there?" she asked. I must have look puzzled. She continued, "I mean are you from down-here in Florida or up there-in Connecticut?" She still had more to say, "I used to be from up-there but I just couldn't stand the winters. My husband and I moved down here to get away from the ice and cold. Horrible stuff. Just horrible. Ungodly. Ice and slush and snish. And the cold. Gads! You people up-there are gluttons for punishment and maybe even a little bit crazy."

I paraded into her chatter. "Perhaps so, but you can't beat New England when it comes to the beauty of each season," I stuck my claim. "Up-there, as you call it, each season has its own distinctive charm and challenge. Each has its own invitation." (I was probably beginning to sound like a preacher.) "My wife's parents retired to Florida," I continued. "We visited one year in the summer and it was unbearable! Can't believe how you or anyone can live with the heat and humidity down-here! I feel sad for people who don't ever get to know the change of the seasons."

That shut it down! We didn't talk again until we were on the ground in Hartford. She smiled kindly as she left, "been a pleasure," she said, "been thinking about what you said. Hope I didn't offend you." And I said, "No, not at all. Hey, thanks for the ride."

Here's something that I believe to my marrow. The weather and the seasons, all four of them, and the cycles of Mother Earth are sacramental in their essence.

Let me explain. A sacrament is "a tangible sign of God's indwelling presence." So to call the seasons sacramental is simply to notice the holiness of God within them. Barbara Brown Taylor says it just right: "Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament, buy which I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection." And then later: "Whoever you are, you are human. And wherever you are, you live in a world which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it."ⁱ

I learned something brand new last week about winter squash. I read that they have their own unique biological map with sensors for day and night, for receiving light and also for growing in the dark. "Researchers have found that it's not the hours of daylight but the length of the dark periods that controls how winter squash grow."ⁱⁱ Hmmm. A tangible sign of God's indwelling presence! I'd call that mystery in the winter squash sacramental with a small s.

Of course, we have sacraments in the church, too. We have two of them: baptism and communion. You might imagine these with a large S. They take us back to the Jordan River and also to the Upper Room. They are mysterious in nature and are formed around visible signs of God's presence as Jesus experienced: water, bread and wine.

But either way, large S or small: tangible, tasteable, palpable, touchable, pure and holy with God's presence. And the seasons are among them.

The Psalmist has told us this for a long, long time. "Wonderful are your works, O God, vast is the sum of them! The whole universe shouts out your glory, O God, most high!" And that song speaks the meta-truth that God designs and creates a universe of mystery and glory, and is present everywhere.

So the winter is not bad and summer good. It's *all* holy stuff! Planting and harvest each have their day. Migration and return are as natural as the sun that shines and the moon that rises. And all of this comes to us as sacramental, small s, signaling the amazing and indescribable goodness and grandeur of God.

*"O God who gives the winter's cold
as well the summer's joyous rays,
us warmly in thy love enfold,
and keep us through life's wintry days."ⁱⁱⁱ*

"For as long as Earth lasts," we are promised; "planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never stop." For as long as earth lasts.

It is probably a very good thing that I didn't get wound up like this with my next-seat-neighbor on the plane. She would have probably asked for a seat change or a parachute!

But I can say such things here. And so I simply encourage us as we come to the table today, as we take hold of the Sacrament (large S) of God's presence given to us in bread and cup; that we also think of the amazing sacraments (small s) wherein we know that God has been near and here, even in the inconsistent moodiness of our seasons.

Wherever this meets you this morning, may you know the blessing of holiness. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar In the World*. HarperOne, 2009, pp. 17-34.

ⁱⁱ Terra Brockman, "Still Life with Winter Squash" in *Christian Century*, February 3, 2016, pp. 10 -13.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Tis Winter Now" by Samuel Longfellow.