

“WINTER”
A Sermon Preached at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer
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The seasons come and go and come again and go again and on and on, departure and return, all in cycle, all in flux. Much of nature is that way: ebb and flow, back and forth, yield and resist, growth and decay. People have sometimes imagined a static state to which nature tends. Scientists are finding that nature's solutions at least often are not static at all but dynamic. A typical illustration is the population of foxes and hares on an island. It would not be illogical to think that without outside interference, eventually there would be so many foxes and so many hares, as many hares as the island's vegetation could feed, as many foxes as that many hares would feed.

It turns out it doesn't work like that. The hare population increases until it finally provokes a fox increase, which only eventually stems the population boom among hares, by which time there is a boom in the fox population that only itself is stemmed when the hare population falls so low it provokes starvation among foxes, which takes its awful toll until the fox population again is so low the hares again start flourishing. Flux and flow, all is in flux and in flow. Humanity fights the spread of deserts, and with good reason, but we discover more and more the considerable degree to which their growth and decline are part of larger cycles spinning through the millions of years, like the advance and retreat of the polar caps, now in sorry decline but sure to come back eventually to bury this spot under an unthinkable weight of ice.

Forests tend to a stable state, pines on that hillside, maples along the creek over there. But forests tend to fire, too, and to different trees that follow, and then to others that take their place in the cycle, round and round. And of course, climates change, conditions change, outside interference is hard to prevent – as those of us know all too well who hope to control human behavior deleterious to life on earth today, like that which depends on the dwindling polar ice caps.

In systems small and large, the name of the stable state is flux, though sometimes it takes a longer view than any human life will behold to see the ground stretch itself into mountains, see the mountains and seas and flatlands change places, see the continents dance.

Other times, change comes at us fast, fast enough to see the flux in flux, the internal perturbations in the cycles, and know that as a notion, winter itself is just a way of averaging out a mostly cold time.

Either way, fast or slow, is fluctuation other than one would expect on this wobbly, spinning, only-semi-circular ball, boiling within and mostly awash on the surface?

Is it any different than one would expect in our own lives, not a little wobbly themselves? Our spirits ebb and flow, as do our needs, our moods, our internal climate, our times of excitement and of quiet, celebration and reflection, holiday and everyday, the grand Fourth of July and the twenty-first of January, Christmas Eve and today.

Wintertime has a long history of service as a metaphor for the quiet, reflective times in our lives, although I know the metaphor works better for some than for others. For the skiers, skaters, and snow-shoers among us, wintertime can be especially high in outwardness and activity.

The metaphor gets even more problematic in other sections of the country, as the compilers of our new hymnbook discovered. Folks in Phoenix and Miami pointed out that winter there, and the living is easy; it is summer that tests the soul (and the local power plant).

And I know there are folks who just don't much notice the weather, one way or the other. Hey, said one, we don't live outdoors any more; and certainly we do so less than most of the rest of the world.

But still. But still, especially after the holidays of late December and all the busyness they can bring, the usual chilliness of this time of the year, the greater than usual chance of sleet and slush, seem a sort of invitation to try to quiet down a bit, to coordinate one's spirit with nature's own season of pause, and indulge some greater inwardness and disengagement from the world around.

The notion that solitude and stillness can be a form of self-indulgence is, I know, yet another idea that comes easier to some than to others. That is why we have the words extrovert and introvert, to notice that, given a choice, some of us are apt to opt to interrelate, while others of us are apt to opt to be alone. But, though we may be more inclined to be more often one way or the other, nearly all of us have our times of both, our times when we have been alone enough, mulled things over, pondered, studied, even brooded enough that it's time to join the gathering, wherever that may be; and our times when we have gathered enough, been together, talked things over, partied, debated, even rallied, enough that it's time to retreat to whatever den or dale will provide us calm and quiet.

The church is a funny kind of place in that it can be both den and gathering, a coming together that can also a time of being unusually alone, alone with our thoughts, with our innerness, here apart from phone machines and junk mail and traffic and keeping up with the house – though the septic system here is raising concerns just now -- but that is not your worry -- you do not need to engage with it, or anything else.

You can take this as a time to be away from the need to be part of, as you rest here securely a part of. You can even avoid even having to say good morning to me if you would rather slip away down the alternative exit route. And if it is your need and mood, you can skip coffee hour, or you can stay and stay.

Ebb and flow, outward and inward, in us each, in us all. As individual people and as a people together, we engage, we disengage, we focus on the world outside, we focus on ourselves.

Our services themselves have their times of turning outward and inward. Maybe I will talk about how that happens within a service some time soon. But whole services sometimes focus one way or the other. Last week's was one that engaged with the world and its problems, and the possibility of our acting on behalf of peace and the wellbeing of others afar. This week's turns inward and reflective.

I wanted to focus on our personal need for time apart from outer demand, from all the mail and email and phone calls, which can accumulate at times beyond hope of ever catching up, it can seem. I raise a cry for common cause in bolstering dikes against the flood.

But I wanted as well to claim a few Winter moments to focus our communal gaze inward as well, on the spirit that moves amongst us. Over the years, I have had cause to wonder in awe at the power of that spirit, both here and as it lives in other congregations, even when they are going through hard times. I once spent a day and a half as part of a two-person investigating team, sent by the credentialing committee of the denomination to interview members of a congregation whose minister had been charged with conduct unbecoming our profession. The charges themselves are confidential, as is the content of nineteen interviews.

But I was struck by something besides the accounts of problematic behavior. I was struck at how likable all the parishioners were, and how much they cared about their church. Here was a church with some serious internal problems, and one person after another gave evidence of deep caring and devotion, the kind I have always felt among you here.

It got me thinking how precious a thing is a congregation, a place where people can hope to find some greater sense of internal peace and understanding, acceptance for themselves as unique individuals in a community of common caring, an opportunity to grow and contribute as a volunteer.

How can that be possible, cranky and willful as many of us are on occasion, at least about some things? I mean, some of us really do not like it when the talk turns to words like god and prayer, and others of us come to church for the chance to pray to God. Some of us think religion is all about transforming society, while others of us think the church should leave society well enough alone, and heal our private souls. And then there are the ministers, and the ideas they keep tossing out come Sunday morn, never right entirely, and sometimes just dead wrong.

How can it work, without creed or common Scripture or authority from afar to keep us united? My answer echoes my sermon last week: because we will it to be so, we will it to work, we will ourselves united. Those in these pews in an earlier age would say that we covenant together, covenant to walk together in the ways of peace and in the light of truth as it shall be made known to us.

The words remain apt. We do not covenant to agree, we covenant to walk together; not to know the truth in final form, but to stay open to its many and differing manifestations :in our midst; not to walk :in conformity, but to walk :in the ways of peace.

And I believe that we covenant together that way, that we will our religious community to work, without the several elements others take to be required, because we want it to be so, even need that there should be a place that welcomes us and our families and friends, welcomes us to a religious home though we do not quite conform to any prescription of belief, to any profession of common faith, except that we would want for ourselves) for our community and the world, a deeper, greater, broader commitment to the universal goals of faith: love and compassion, creativity and beauty, wisdom and knowledge, mercy and justice.

Such are my thoughts of a week in the winter, thoughts of greater inward devotion, as people apart, and as a people together, even as in the flux and flow of life the church rallies souls to engage with the world, refreshed and strengthened as they may be by weeks like this when we offer not challenge but comfort, not a call to action but an invitation to timely retreat.

May you be blessed with the quiet and solitude and calm you may need; may inwardness strengthen you, and us as a community, now and again; and may outward call of the highest sort then find us strong for the effort, strong for the cause, strong for justice and hope and peace, refreshed as we will be by the "gentle darkness, soft and still" of winter or whenever our spirits may feel, in life's unending flux, quiet and peace through us. Amen.