

Come Before Winter

(based on 2 Timothy 4:6-13, 19-22)

From deep beneath the grimy streets of Rome, in a dark, dirty, and cold jail cell a man whose days are numbered writes words of compassion, encouragement, and instructions. A chill from the damp, stone blocks of his cell, sends shivers up his spine. He is afraid and alone. His name is Paul. His letter is to his beloved friend Timothy.

The Spring is a glorious time of renewal. Light rain dropping rivulets of water upon newly budding blossoms. The pungent smell of hyacinths and lilies lingering in the air. Greens a myriad of shades brilliantly coming alive. New thoughts, desires and goals sprouting and taking root. People venturing out of doors, visiting gardens and favorite haunts. Fresh insights, feeling cleansed and renewed. The springtime of our minds, bodies, and spirits.

The Summer is the time of action and being busy. Voices of children playing in the park, the sights of friends and families breaking bread together beneath the shade of a widespread oak tree among picnic baskets and blankets spread upon the green carpet of tender grass. Summer romances, the sounds of the honks and toots of motorists rushing home to shed business attire for shorts and a T-shirt with a cool refreshing glass of ice tea. Working on our goals, moving through the processes of filling our days. The summertime of our minds, bodies and spirits.

The Fall is a splendid time filled with splashes of color, constantly changing Greens fading to red, orange, yellow, and umber. The clean crisp air beckoning us still to remain out-of-doors for one more day. To rumble in the leaves, taking stock in the harvest. Gathering in all of our work which sprouted, was tended and grew, now ripe for the plucking for its use and purposes. The bounty counted as profit

and work well done. Campfires to warm the chill in the evening breeze. Roasting hot dogs and making s'mores. Watching the leaves drift silently to the ground as they shrug their coats of fiery colors and wither and dry to brown. the fall of our minds, bodies, and spirits.

The Winter is the time of stillness and rest as snow flurries conceal, as a secret, the sounds of voices of life. Bare tree branches posed starkly against the clear white sky. The honking and formation of geese and other birds as they head further south to escape the bitterness and the bone-chilling cold. The union of heaven and earth beneath their white blanket of emptiness. Melancholy thoughts, quiet disturbed moods, past remembrances of people dead and gone, yearning for those alive, yet unseen. Doors shut tight, cars left abandoned in snowbanks as the world grinds to a halt. The winter of our minds, bodies and spirits.

Don't misunderstand me when I paint such a bleak picture of winter. I love the changes of the seasons here in Pennsylvania. I have lived here all my life and yes, there are many who love the seasonal change of winter, especially. Those who dare the cold, and brace the snow and ice. Who make angels on their backs, igloos from packed blocks, snow creatures of large round balls mounted one on top of another and decorated with Dad's hat and vegetables borrowed from the refrigerator. They see the intricate delicacy of each snowflake and the beauty of the hushed fields and snowy gown clad evergreens. But, for me, the winter of our souls and spirits is much more bleak.

These few words of Paul's written to his beloved friend Timothy carry such a weighty message and urgency to him. Come before winter. Why? Before winter or never. There are some things which will never be done unless they are done "before winter." The winter will come and the winter will pass, and the flowers of the springtime will deck the breast of the earth, and the graves of some of our

opportunities, perhaps the grave of our dearest friend. There are golden gates wide open on autumn days, but next November they will be forever shut. There are tides of opportunities running now at the flood. Next November they will be at the ebb. There are voices speaking today which a year from today will be silent. Come before winter. Before winter or never.

A number of years ago, I served as a hospice chaplain. One day I met a man by the name of Jim, who was just a year younger than myself. He lived in a very small efficiency apartment; it was always dark and dreary. When Sally, the social worker and I would arrive each week to make a list of his needs, we would sit and chat for a long while and listen to his stories. Two months went by and a once-a-week visit became twice a week, then three times a week, eventually his needs became daily. His body was slowly resisting the little help his doctor could provide and it was succumbing to the eventualities of his cancer. One Friday afternoon, we sat by his bedside and watched him take his last breath. There were three others in the room besides this dying young man to validate his life and to witness his passing from this life to the next. There was his doctor who was assigned and paid to care for his physical needs which had become an increasingly difficult task as his body became less his own and more unknown to all of us, his social worker who was assigned and paid to care for his everyday needs which became increasingly more difficult when he could no longer work, pay his bills, or do his daily chores, even dressing. And there was me, assigned and paid by the hospice to officiate at his funeral service when the time came. No friends, no loved ones, no family. All had deserted him and paid no heed to his urgent cries for their visits and their love.

For Jim, winter had come and gone. His voice was now silent forever. The words left unsaid by those who had at one time cared for him clung soundlessly in the air as they gathered for his funeral. Many people came from the hospice, man

of the volunteers and the staff. His family sat stoically in the first aisle, no tears, no sighs, no emotion. Until in the middle of the service his father stood up and came to the front. His eyes were lowered, but he looked up and said, "I can't remain silent anymore." Through a flood of tears he told us of his love for his son, regardless of the bad feelings that had been left between them, the heart wrenching story of his own misbehavior and guilt. One by one each person brought to tears they too asked for forgiveness. I was four years out of seminary and it was the most difficult funeral I've ever done. But all I could think of were these words by Paul, Come Before Winter. For Jim, winter had come and no one came.

One summer I was covering for a fellow colleague while he was on vacation. A request came for me to visit an older woman in a nursing facility who's life was drawing to a close. The nurses felt that she needed to speak with a pastor. I went over and sat by the woman's bed as she drifted in and out of reality, drifted in and out of hysteria and coherence. I sat with her as she wailed and screamed and babbled about this and that and then suddenly she grabbed my arm and demanded to know if she was truly forgiven.

During the three hours I sat with her I managed to put the puzzle pieces of her life into a ragged semblance of order. I learned that her life had been difficult with the deaths of both her parents as a young girl, growing up in an orphanage, marrying young to an alcoholic and abuser. She in turn took out her frustrations on her children which grew up to despise her and eventually to abandon her completely. She had no idea where either of them were living, if they were even living at all. She hadn't spoken to either of them in over forty years.

I was called late in the evening having gone home restless and not much interested in sleep. The nursing home was calling to inform me that the woman had died. I asked them if they knew the whereabouts of her children. They had no

knowledge of any living relatives. In the morning, I spoke with the church secretary. After several conversations with some older members of the church and a number of phone calls by the secretary, both son and daughter were located.

After speaking to them on the phone, they were content to have their mother's lawyer make all of the necessary arrangements and that they would not be interested in coming in to attend the memorial service or see to their mother's burial. I refused to give upon them that easily and after speaking to both of them again at length concerning the long, torturous and agonizing visit I had with their mother – they finally agreed to come. But, oh, how sad for them.

Come Before Winter.

I don't often talk about my father much. We are very different people he and I, always have been. I have a difficult time remembering any moment when we ever really got along. Over the years of growing up, I blamed him for many things and cared less and less. Following my parent's divorce and moving away from my hometown area, we didn't speak to one another for over a year. Finally, short messages came and went from both of us.

And time came for me to give a sermon on Sunday morning on Father's Day for the first time. I had spent long hours working on a message that focused predominantly on the characteristics of God as a holy, perfect Father in heaven. I made one reference to my earthly Father and I couldn't continue. The hurt, anger, frustration, and guilt of all the years had finally built up like a dam that finally burst.

From that moment I realized my own role in the problems he and I have had over the years, that it is never any one person's fault, that relationships are difficult even for the most well-matched pairs, and more so for those who are different. My father and I began to speak more and keep track more of each other's lives. Quite

some time ago, my father had a heart attack. I was called from the hospital. When it heard, I left immediately to go see him. I needed to get back home and tell him I loved him and he needed to hear it.

Of course, you cannot change the past, and we are still not the best of friends, but we speak more often and know that deep down inside we care and love.

Paul yearned for this friend Timothy. To see him one more time, before winter came. We have no idea whether or not Timothy heeded the call of his friend. But I imagine he made haste in gathering things for the journey and setting out immediately. Suppose that Timothy had not gone right away, instead said to himself, “Yes, I shall start for Rome; but first of all I must clear up some matters here at Ephesus, and then go down to Miletus to ordain elders there, and then over to Colossae to celebrate the Communion there.” When he has attended to all these matters, he starts for Troas, and there inquires when he can get a ship which will carry him across to Macedonia, and then to Italy, or on that is sailing around Greece into the Mediterranean. He is then told that the season for sailing is over. “No ships for Italy until April.”

All through that cold and anxious winter we can imagine Timothy upset with himself that he did not go at once when he received Paul’s plea, and wondering on pins and needles how his beloved friend and mentor is. When the first ship sets sail in the spring Timothy is on it. He lands at Neapolis and hurries on his way to Rome. There he finds no prisoner by the name of Paul. And they say, “O Timothy, don’t you know that Paul was beheaded this past winter? Every time the jailer put the key to the door, Paul thought it might be you. His last message was for you. He said, “Give my love to Timothy, my beloved son in the faith, when he comes.”

Come Before Winter.

Do not wait until tomorrow to reach out a helping hand to reconcile your differences, to call a friend and share intimate moments. Do not waste the time God has blessed us with to careless ways and injurious speech. Make right today that which is wrong.

I repeat the words of the Apostle Paul and in so doing invite you to organize your own thoughts for those you must see or talk to this day. “Come Before Winter” – Come before the haze of Indian Summer has faded in snow from the fields. Come before the last November wind strips the leaves completely from the trees and sends them whirling over the earth. Come before the snow lies on the hilltops and the water turns to ice. Come before the heart is cold. Come before desire has failed. Come before life is over and your chances have all ended, and you stand before God to give an account of the use you have made of the opportunities which in God’s holy and merciful grace God has granted to you.

Come Before Winter!

AMEN