

Preparing for winter, preparing for God

The Spirit's presence often feels like winter's dry wind.

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Winter in Pittsburgh. [Some rights reserved](#) by [saeru](#).

After living in North Carolina for 15 years, my family approached our first winter in Pittsburgh as an adventure. Many mornings I shoveled our long, sloping driveway while my neighbor, a lifelong Pittsburgher, steered a self-propelled snowblower across his shorter, flatter drive. We bought snow tires for the first time, winter boots and jumpers and thick gloves for the kids, multiple ice scrapers, and a 50-pound bag of salt—the arsenal with which we attacked the season. When April arrived, we felt accomplished, powerful: we'd survived our first real winter.

Then a colleague at the seminary where I teach, who moved from North Carolina to Pittsburgh the year before we did, offered an ominous warning: “The second winter is much worse; the second winter you know what’s coming.”

She was right. By early November, I was already anxious anticipating the early mornings in the driveway, the aching back and neck from shoveling, and the relentless gray that triggers seasonal blues, which I’d experienced for the first time the previous year. So our preparations became a defense, behind which we’d hunker until spring’s thaw.

I am remembering those first couple of winters in Pittsburgh this morning as I reread Katherine May’s *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*. Like so many people, I read it in 2020 and found solace during the first year of a pandemic that has stretched on like an interminable winter. A friend’s post on Facebook, naming the book as one of her favorites of 2021, inspired me to read it again.

It’s helping me to see how my stance toward winter has changed, and more: it’s reminding me of the heart of prayer.

May recounts a conversation with a Finnish friend in which the friend detailed the many elaborate preparations for winter in Finland, preparations that begin in July. They’re not so much a defense against winter as they are a way of welcoming the bone-chilling cold, the short days, and the depths of snow. Of welcoming the dark and the sorrow. Of welcoming all of winter the way children welcome a snow day—as a gift.

Reading this, I realize that my own family’s preparations for winter have become something similar.

It’s Saturday morning, and I look out the window at this year’s first blanket of snow. The world looks like a newly baptized child in her crisp, white dress. Snow boots cluster around the front door, and coats congregate on the floor nearby. Three days ago I had snow tires put on my car, and the next day I had the car’s dying battery replaced. A week ago we opened and drained the outdoor spigots, having learned the hard way what happens to water-filled pipes in the winter.

We don’t know, can’t know, what’s coming: another polar vortex, a blizzard perhaps, or a mild spell in which my son and I shoot baskets several days in a row. So we prepare. Not to defend, but to welcome. As May writes, “We must learn to invite the

winter in.”

The church is now in the season after Epiphany, wandering in the land between two of my favorite days on the liturgical calendar: the Baptism of the Lord and the Feast of the Presentation. A few weeks ago we observed the former, hearing read in worship John the Baptist’s declaration that one is coming who will baptize the world with a refining fire. It would be understandable if our first instinct were to defend ourselves again such a holy blaze.

And in a few days, on February 2, the Feast of the Presentation, we will remember when Mary and Joseph carried the baby Jesus to the Temple, and Mary received Simeon’s ominous warning: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Who wouldn’t want to raise a shield against *that*? Even Mary herself might have pondered ways to avoid this inevitable outcome.

There are times when the news of God’s coming like a refining fire to unveil our hidden thoughts seems like a forecast for a bleak winter. Of course, many presentations of what that divine future will bring sound blissful: lions and lambs reclining together, milk and honey and wine aplenty, mourning and weeping wiped away.

But we also know that God’s coming can shake and sift us. Theologian Robert Jenson called the Holy Spirit God’s future, and while our faith attests that God’s future shines with glory, the witness of scripture and the experience of the saints warn us that on the journey to glory the wind of the Spirit’s presence often feels like winter’s dry wind, cracking lips and chapping cheeks.

This truth makes me wonder about how I relate to God, how I prepare to meet the holy. Does my practice of prayer ever become a defense strategy? Do I assume that, with Bible in hand, prayer app opened, and timer set for silent meditation, I can somehow escape the necessary judgements of grace? That these habits will guarantee consolation and hold me in a place that feels like divine favor?

And if so, do I risk protecting myself against what I most desire: to be made like Christ?

I don't want prayer to be a defense. I want my praying to prepare me to welcome the winter of God's presence as much as I want to welcome God's presence when it feels like spring's new hope or summer's radiance. I want prayer—indeed, my whole life—to reflect Simeon's posture toward Jesus. After long years of preparation and waiting, his arms stretch wide to receive God's gift. He's spent a lifetime getting ready to offer this welcome. Preparing to invite God's future in.

Approached this way, maybe prayer can help us do the same.

My daughter bursts from her bedroom, phone in hand, having just checked the weather forecast. "Dad, is it going to rain all day tomorrow? Does that mean the snow will melt?"

"Yes," I tell her.

So she texts a friend to arrange a time to sled later today, and I decide that this afternoon I will take a walk—when the sun is high, the snow bright, and the temperature peaks near 30 degrees. I'm already prepared: boots slumped at the door, new gloves stuffed in the pockets of an old coat, and wool cap waiting on the piano bench. It's nearly time to step outside to welcome winter in earnest, to welcome winter again.