

Winter gloom like the noonday (Isaiah 58:1-12)

Mardi Gras sounds more fun.

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After years of living in the Midwest I thought I'd made my peace with winter, but no.

I think I saw the sun once in January, a mysterious orb shining weakly in the distance as I let my dog run along the muddy banks of the St. Joseph River. St. Joseph is the patron of fathers, and I like to hang out there, thinking of my own dad, who is probably riding his bike in the sunshine back in Louisiana.

I know people are sick of me complaining about winter. I'm also sick of it. I've been at it for 20 years! I've found it helps to be outdoors even if it's miserable, so every day I leash the dog and head for the river.

Today the sprinkling of cattails on the banks recalls a line from Isaiah: "to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes." Yes, thank you, sounds right. My phone buzzes with a text from a friend: "Why do we live here?!" Sometimes it feels like a months-long fast, at least for the senses.

Meanwhile, people in southern Louisiana are having *fun*. Friends back home in New Orleans are posting pictures of themselves in T-shirts and sunglasses at Mardi Gras parades. A lot of people don't realize that carnival season lasts for weeks, from Epiphany to midnight on Ash Wednesday, and there are parades and parties throughout, culminating in Fat Tuesday. Dry January? Absolutely not.

The celebration is secularized, obviously, but it still reminds me of how we used to move along the wheel of the church year in ways that might have helped us cope a little better with the crueller seasons—and to appreciate the sweet relief of a well-timed party. When I moved away, I realized how much joy a shared culture with communal celebrations had brought to my life.

My dad stopped celebrating Mardi Gras when he became born-again-too pagan—but I never associated the celebration with debauchery and sin. I mostly associated it with Friday king cake parties. Someone brings a king cake—to school, to work, to your neighbor—and then whoever gets the baby tucked inside brings the next one. Having to give that up to be Christian always seemed like an unnecessary austerity measure to me, one that God would neither demand nor take delight in. The God of Isaiah asks for us to come together and lift each other's burdens, to share what bread we have, maybe even a sweet bread coated in sparkling sugar.

When I arrived home from work one January day after a long, dark commute down I-80 to find a delivery from Gambino's Bakery on my porch, I let loose an actual whoop of delight. A Louisiana friend had remembered me, languishing in the dismal monochrome of the Rust Belt! I opened the box knowing I'd find a king cake and bags of colorful plastic beads and green and gold doubloons. My kids gathered with me around the kitchen table, and when we opened the lid it was like opening a window, letting in warmth and light, making, for a moment, the gloom like the noonday.