

“Thanksgiving Blessing: Come Before Winter”

2 Timothy 4:9-22

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Old man winter is arriving right on cue for this sermon, tonight will be the first night below freezing of the year for most of us, and isn't that an unofficial start of winter as our teeth chatter and we pull up the covers and snuggle together in bed? Now, I would agree that this sermon title probably would be better for Buffalo, Bangor, Butte, Boise, or even Denver which is currently digging out from under 18 inches of snow, or even my native Pittsburgh, where I heard this sermon title for the first time four decades ago.

Each autumn for almost 40 years, Dr. Clarence MacCartney preached, “Come Before Winter” to the always packed First Presbyterian Church on Sixth Avenue, downtown. Now, forty years in a row of the same sermon could try the patience of a congregation. It would surely help to cut sermon preparation time, but it also had a comforting influence on the people in the pew. Dr. MacCartney always said he repeated it reluctantly, acquiescing to the popular demand of his congregation.

I know at least a score of pastors who preach their own or borrowed “Come Before Winter” sermons at least every other year for decades. There is a common theme that resonates with many.

“Come Before Winter. . .” Our Scripture lesson is 2 Timothy. Two letters are attributed by Paul to Timothy. They are both friendly and helpful. Paul was reminding his young friend that his faith was the most important possession he would ever have. “You can gain the whole world, but if you lose your own soul, you are dumb, and done!” You can live and die without almost anything else, but not without your faith. “A faith,” in Timothy's case, Paul reminds him, “that began with his grandmother, Lois, then came down through his mother Eunice, and I am sure,” Paul wrote, “that faith now dwells in you.” Isn't it sad how many people grow up and lose the faith of their parents and grandparents? By the third generation more than money can disappear.

The particular issue at the end of 2 Timothy is that winter was on the way. The letter reveals Paul's sense of urgency. His life is almost over. He is under arrest in Rome. He warned Timothy that the time of his departure is at hand. But he wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

But meanwhile, the winter season was coming. Paul wrote, “Do your best to come to me soon; come before winter. . .” He wanted to see Timothy one more time. Timothy was the son Paul never had. He knew that as long as Timothy remained faithful, the faith would go on.

Everyone had deserted Paul at his trial and you can hear the loneliness in his words, “No one took my part,” he says. It sounds just like those ominous words at the end of the trial of Jesus and at the crucifixion where John notes: “they all forsook Him and fled.” “

“No one was there to console me,” Paul says; but, “The Lord stood by me and gave me all the strength I needed.” He always will, if you expect it. “My faith is not in question. But I am lonely, Timothy, please come; come before winter.”

Then, Paul wrote, “When you come, please bring my cloak.” Paul apparently had forgotten his cloak. He had left it over at Troas, a seaport town where Paul first had his vision that he should go over to Macedonia (or Europe) to share the Gospel. It was cold in that Roman prison, especially during the night, and it would be worse come winter. Even gentlemen of note had but one cloak. “Timothy, please bring my cloak.”

“And, bring my parchments,” those are his scriptures. Bad enough when one’s body shivers through the long nights in a cold cell, but it is worse to have shivers of the soul, without the Word of God to warm you inside. Paul loved the Psalms and Prophets, and the Torah.

Next, Paul sent some friendly greetings to some people in Ephesus that he knew. Mostly cordial, but I smile when I read that he warned Timothy of “Alexander the Coppersmith,” who might do him great harm. That is a funny little mention to go down in history as part of God’s Holy Word: “Alexander the Coppersmith did me great harm.” And Alexander thought he got away with it. . . .

Now remember, Paul was in Rome. Timothy was far across the Mediterranean Sea. A Mediterranean cruise is delightful in summer. But, the sea is treacherous in winter, usually impassable. If Timothy did not make the voyage before winter set in, he would not be able to come until late February or March.

“Come before winter.” I remember how isolated the older folks would get in my first church in Pittsburgh when the winter months rolled in. They felt like they couldn’t get out and people weren’t as keen on visiting them either. Your car would slip and slide up and down those brick streets that always look so quaint but held the ice and snow in between the cracks and made it especially slippery. I know, I slid on many of those streets trying to make my weekly rounds of visiting the homebound and sick.

“Come before winter.” The words are an obvious reminder that we need to be attentive to the people all around us while we all are here. Some assume a burden for their aging parents or spouses. I think of women caught between two generations, mother and daughter at the same time, as well as wife, with three potentially conflicting obligations. I think of the men and women who come to a time in their lives when they should be able to relax and seek their own identities and enjoy things for a while, and then added worries and obligations from the previous or the next generation comes along. Sometimes it seems unfair, but . . . life wasn’t meant to be fair. “Come before winter.”

“Come before winter” . . . friends need to whisper it to each other. How many of us have said it in how many different ways and times, “I’ll be over to see you,” or, “We’ll have to get together,” or, “Let’s have dinner together;”. . . you know what I mean. Then fall arrives and winter comes . . . and we never get around to doing it! I have been touched by this familiar little poem:

A Vanished Friend

Around the corner I have a friend,
In this great city that has no end;
Yet days go by, and weeks rush on,
And before I know it a year is gone,
And I never see my old friend’s face,
For Life is a swift and terrible race.
He knows I like him just as well
As in the days when I rang his bell
And he rang mine. We were younger then,
And now we are busy, tired old men:
Tired with playing a foolish game,
Tired with trying to make a name.
‘Tomorrow,’ I say, ‘I will call on Jim,
Just to show that I’m thinking of him.’
But tomorrow comes—and tomorrow goes,
And the distance between us grows and grows.

Around the corner!—yet miles away. . .
Here’s a telephone call: “Jim died today.”
And that’s what we get, and deserve in the end:
Around the corner, a vanished friend.

“Come before winter.” It is a reminder to friends.

It is obvious, too, that it belongs to families. “I sigh, then kiss you, for I must own, that I shall miss you when you have grown.” When you look at a whole life, there is not much of a window for us to have a direct influence on our children or grandchildren or even great-grandchildren. If you get all mixed up in your own little stuff and keep on doing all the things you want to do, you will disappoint them, and in the end disappoint yourself. Parenthood requires sacrifice, self-giving, putting others first. There is only a brief window of time in your life to devote yourself to those around you.

Winter comes. Winter does not always arrive on schedule. It does not always pick an appropriate and convenient time. It does not always cover the ski slopes alone. Winter can come without warning. Winter comes. When I was four, a freak snow storm blew into western Pennsylvania on Thanksgiving weekend. Without warning it came and just sat there for two days. There was no warning to run to the store and buy bread and milk! Forty-eight inches of snow fell in two days. The snow was four weeks early. But look

outside, it was surely winter. Everything stopped, all at once. Kids thought it was great. My dad finally walked three miles to the township building along with other neighbors, got out the equipment and began plowing our roads so that we could go and get some food. It was a dangerous situation. Sometimes winter does not pick a convenient time to come. It happens so quickly.

“Come before winter.” I once baptized a man at age 75. Frank was a good and God-fearing man. You would have liked him. For seven decades-plus of his life he never saw his way clear to accept Christ and embrace the Christian faith. Then he heard a sermon one day that touched his heart. He asked to be baptized. He joined the church. He loved it. He was finally at home. A few years . . . the last thing I recall Frank said to me from his hospital bed, was, “I wish I had done it years and years ago. I missed a lot of peace.” Don’t put off your decisions until some tomorrow. For all you know . . . tomorrow may never come.

“Come before winter.” There is never enough time to do all the things you want to do. For others will tell you, “just when you learn to know your way around, the time will come to move along to somewhere else.”

In McCartney’s original sermon he talked about a man who lived in a house at the top of the hill. It was a long ride to the top of the hill. One had to set out early to make it to the top. There was a marvelous view from up there of the whole countryside. You didn’t get to see the old man once winter had come. If you wanted the view, if you wanted to seek the wisdom of the man at the top of the hill you had to come before winter. Come before winter if you are going to visit.

*Come before the haze of Indian summer has faded from the fields!
Come before the November wind strips the leaves from the trees and sends them
whirling!
Come before the snow lies on the uplands and the meadow brook is turned to ice!
Come before the heart is cold! Come before the desire has failed!
Come before life is over and your probation ended and you stand before God to give an
account!
Come before you must confess what you have done with the gifts he has granted you!
Come before winter! (C. McCartney)*

We don’t know if Timothy made it or not. Scripture doesn’t tell us the answer nor is there a story from the early church about who was standing there when Paul met the executioner. All we have are Paul’s urgent words to Timothy and to all of us, “do your best to come before winter.”