



From the Pulpit: December 19, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Job 38, select verses

Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, IV: Snow

The Advent and Christmastide we're preaching a sermon series called Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season. I want to talk about snow today. It may surprise you that snow is mentioned a couple of times in the Bible, but not very often, including this beautiful passage in Job. This passage happens in chapter 38, almost at the end of The Book of Job. So what's happening is that Job has essentially spent 37 chapters whining to God about God's shotty management of the universe. By chapter 38 God's had it up to here with Job's whining and God tell Job off. One of the exhibits in God's defense strategy is God's creation of snow and ice.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

*"Who is this that darkens counsel
by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

*"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.*

*"Or who shut in the sea with doors
and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped?'*

*"Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,*

*"Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt,*

*"Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?
From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?
The waters become hard like stone,
and the face of the deep is frozen.*

*"So as a Semi-Sacred
Symbol of the Season,
snow is a late and
foreign intruder to the
biblical story, but it
works, doesn't it?"*

The connection of Christmas with Snow is inescapable. A selective catalogue of snow carols would include:

- Let it Snow*
- It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*
- Jingle Bells*
- Winter Wonderland*
- The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*
- In the Bleak Midwinter*
- All I Want for Christmas*
- Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*
- Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*
- Sleigh Ride*

and the Granddaddy of them all, *White Christmas*, from the film *Holiday Inn*, which is set in Connecticut but filmed in Los Angeles and Sonoma, presumably under palm trees and among grapevines.

White Christmas is the best-selling single of all time. Bing Crosby sold 50 million copies by himself, and cover artists have sold another 50 million.

Even Santa Claus, with his fur coat, snow boots, and North Pole headquarters, derives from St. Nicholas, a malnourished monk from arid Turkey.

How did this happen, this almost spiritual connection between Christmas and snow? It is 49° in Bethlehem right now. Tonight, it will fall to a low of 44°. It rarely dips below freezing. It does snow occasionally, but rarely.

In Jesus' day, there might have been a few shepherds keeping watch in the fields around Bethlehem in December, but shepherds more commonly pastured their flocks in April or October, Bible scholars guess that Jesus might have been born in April. The Bible tells us **where** Jesus was born, but not **when**, so they made it up.

How did this happen? It happened because the winners get to write the story we tell about ourselves, and in this case, the Europeans won.

In the fourth century, when most citizens of the Roman Empire worshiped the pagan pantheon, Emperor Constantine, not knowing when Jesus was born, attached the celebration of his birth to the existing pagan festival Saturnalia in December, very near the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year.

Saturnalia was concocted to coax Saturn, the Roman god of fertility and agriculture, out of exile and back to the earth where he belonged.

It was the most genius marketing strategy in the history of marketing strategies. Today Christmas is well over a trillion-dollar industry. Saturn, Jesus.

So as a Semi-Sacred Symbol of the Season, snow is a late and foreign intruder to the biblical story, but it works, doesn't it?

It's a remarkable substance, right? Since the beginning, snowflakes have become the default exemplar of both the reliable orderliness, almost the monotony, of God's creation, and yet at the same time, also of creation's astonishing, unexpected variety.

Creation's routine orderliness because every single snowflake that's ever fallen to earth has six sides. I never thought about this before, but that's because of

water's familiar, shapely chemistry. Nothing's more routine in chemistry than H₂O—three atoms which build a hexagonal lattice when they freeze and crystallize around a speck of dust or pollen.

The routine orderliness, almost monotony, of creation, but also unexpected multiplicity, the default exemplar of God's inexhaustible creativity.

No two snowflakes are ever alike, they say. Well maybe, but you can't prove it. One undecillion snowflakes have fallen on earth since the beginning. **There's** a word I'd never heard before yesterday: undecillion. That's a one followed by 36 zeroes. So you really can't prove the hypothesis "no two snowflakes are identical" by experiment or observation. But the important thing is no one's managed to find two that match, so there might

be an undecillion ways of being a snowflake.

So snow is a semi-sacred symbol of the season because it exemplifies creation's constant, unchanging exactitude, but also God's stunning creativity and unpredictability.

But more importantly at Christmastide, snow is an image of God's comprehensive, unmerited grace.

Snow is a symbol of innocence and purity. "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be whiter than snow." Snow White is the paragon of feminine virtue.

“snow is a semi-sacred symbol of the season because it exemplifies creation's constant, unchanging exactitude, but also God's stunning creativity and unpredictability.”

A white sheath drapes the dormant earth like a wedding dress, and the landscape of scattered leaves, broken twigs, and rutted earth is bedecked with beauty, covered up with God's lavish plenitude.

It's tranquil after a snowstorm. Snow is mostly empty air, so it silences the noise. You can think. You can dream.

Well, there are limits. Remember Snowmageddon from 2011; 21 inches of snow? Snowmageddon. Or was it Snow-apocalypse? I forget. That wasn't very tranquil.

It can be exhausting to live in northern climes, snow or no snow. What did the guy from Vermont say to the Pillsbury Dough Boy? "Hey, nice tan."

Bruce Springsteen sold his entire song catalogue to Sony for a half a billion bucks this week. Do you think it's worth it? Pop survey. What's the greatest rock song of all time: *Stairway to Heaven* or *Born to Run*?

Bruce Springsteen is a national treasure, a sort of unofficial poet laureate, quintessential America, with all its triumphs and tribulations.

He was born, raised, and still lives in New Jersey, so Bruce Springsteen knows about snow. He says a good snowstorm makes us free. "No work, no school, the world shutting its big mouth for a while, the dirty streets covered over in virgin white, like all the missteps you've taken have been erased by nature... You open your door on a trackless world, your old path, your history, momentarily covered over by a landscape of forgiveness, a place where something new might happen."¹

I love the way he puts it: your missteps erased by nature, covered over by a landscape of forgiveness. A landscape of forgiveness: think of that this Christmastide, if it's a White Christmas, or even if it's not.

This Christmastide, thank God for God's gift of Jesus, which is the Greek form of the Hebrew name 'Joshua,' which means, "God is my salvation."

"A white sheath
drapes the
dormant earth like
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and the landscape
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Because we all need someone to love us no matter what. We all need someone to love us not **because of**, but **in spite of**, who we are and what we've done.

We all make mistakes. We unwittingly injure others, even and especially the one we love the most. We do not **deserve**, but must **receive**, God's lavish, lasting, limitless love, our missteps covered over with a landscape of forgiveness. That is the whole reason he was born in snowless Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

You've heard me talk many times about Gregory Boyle, the priest who started Homeboy Industries in the Roman Catholic parish in Los Angeles with more gang activity than any other. He loves the homies, and the homies love him, because he gives them a second chance.

A homegirl named Lety visits Father Greg in his office. "Name any horrific, terrible thing that could

befall a human being and it's befallen her: prison, drug addiction, domestic violence, kids taken away. I would not have survived a single day in her childhood. It would be a far shorter list if you wrote down the horrific things that *haven't* happened to her. In fact I can't think of anything."

¹ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), pp. 160–161.

“She’s asking me for some help when she suddenly says, ‘I wish you were God.’ I laugh, but I see Lety’s not laughing; she’s about to cry. ‘Why do you wish I was God?’ I ask. She says, ‘Cuz...I think you’d let me into heaven.’ I grab her hands and pull her as close as I can across the top of my desk. I look her in the eyes. We are both crying. ‘Lety, I swear to you, if I get to heaven and you’re not there...I’m not stayin’.”²

In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan
Earth stod hard as iron
Water like a stone
Snow had fallen
Snow on snow on snow
In the bleak midwinter
Long, long ago.³

And the whole world was covered up with a landscape
of forgiveness.

—Prayers of the People— By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Holy God, creator of the foundations of the earth
and the oceans depths, maker of the dusk and dawn,
and the ancient constellations overhead,

This Advent season, you lead us nearer to the
mystery of the manger, where your love for all is
made known. And so with thankful hearts, we
prepare to receive your love and grace through your
son. With expectation, we deck the halls and adorn
the tree. We find joy in the giggles of children, giddy
with anticipation for this long awaited eve when the
world will be blanketed in silent adoration.

Giver of life and love, in you we find community
and kinship. Keep us mindful of the ways our lives
are interconnected, the ways our health and well
being depend on one another.

As Omicron races around the world, we ask your
blessing upon the weary caregivers and the tiring
health care workers. We give thanks for vaccines
and hospitals and pray that they might be in
abundant supply not just here, but in every corner
of the globe. We pray for the sick and those in need
of healing.

In all that is uncertain, when we struggle to find
a way, when the charts and graphs offer no easy
answers, we ask that you calibrate our inner
compasses toward love and compassion.

With our loved ones near and far in mind, we pray
silently, the deepest prayers of our hearts.

Gracious God, all that is tender, all that is mystery,
all that is exhausting, all that is something other than
we long for, all that is tentative expectation, we trust
to you, as we lift our voices together in prayer...

² Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), p. 28.

³ “In the Bleak Midwinter,” hymn by Christina Rossetti, c. 1872.