

“In the Bleak Mid-Winter”
December 10, 2017
The Reverend Bill Clark

“In the bleak mid-winter, in this world of pain.....”

It’s funny but I have never thought of this hymn as exactly a happy and cheery holiday carol. Even the title says it all – in the bleak mid-winter!

It’s that word bleak. I mean after all it does not conjure up visions of brightly adorned evergreens, festive holiday tables or a menorah lit up in candle light. Bleak conjures bleakness – desolate and/or cold. Synonyms would be miserable, drab, dreary, depressing – in the miserable mid-winter. This about says it all.

Yet as our responsive reading states; “let us not wish away the winter for it is a season to itself, not simply the way to spring.” And this was always my view of winter – the season we need to somehow struggle through to get to spring. However, after living in an area of the country – Texas for five years where winter was practically non-existent I began to better appreciate the stark contrast winter brings to the turning of the calendar year. I began to see the beauty of trees at rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light and tracing themselves delicately against the dawns and sunsets.

The winter skies exhibit a clarity and brilliance mixing together with the cold icy air – brings out an awareness of each and every breathe – and allows us to directly feel the very chill of being alive.

So with the earth blanketed down for the winter months – perhaps glistening with frost, ice and snow we move directly into the holiday season when expectations run high for the best Christmas or Hanukkah ever!!! Oh, yes, in the bleak mid-winter!

What happens if you are one of many people who look upon this time of year with dreadful anticipation? What happens if the joy of the season doesn't quite find you and you feel like you lost your invite to the holiday celebrations?

Yes, indeed what if the holidays are nothing but blue ones. Now the song ***Blue Christmas*** is a Christmas song written by Billy Hayes and Jay W. Johnson. The heart-broken tale of unrequited love during the holidays had long been considered a Christmas staple of country music, having been recorded by Ernest Tubb in 1948. Elvis Presley effectively made *Blue Christmas* a steadfast rock-and-roll holiday classic by recording it in his signature style in 1957.

This simple song speaks directly to the disappointments and challenges of not getting what you had hoped for at Christmas time. Well what if the season is the anniversary of a death, betrayal, divorce? What if the memories of this time of year are not ones filled with carol singing and gift giving but rather alcoholism, abuse or neglect?

It was Christmas 1998. It was the first Christmas without my eldest brother, Peter, his wife, Kate and their two sons. They had recently all moved from Maine to Florida – Katie having had enough of the bleak Maine Mid-Winters and snow. Kate, was to me Ms. Christmas herself. She made all of her tree ornaments herself, had the tallest tree of anyone else and simply thoroughly embedded herself with the holiday spirit. Now the family had a nickname for Katie. It was the kitchen ant – as she was always the one who cleaned up the kitchen after Christmas dinners – always. Christmas 1998 it fell to me – not sure how or why this occurred but suddenly there I was amidst the turkey platters, gravy bowls and a heap of dirty dishes. After being named the new kitchen ant I had to call Katie in Florida, place the phone next to the dishwasher and told her I had taken on her job as the new Clark kitchen ant. I am so

happy I did as Katie died the next day – Boxing Day. My brother found her under there Christmas tree dead.

Naturally we were all devastated. The cause of death was alcoholism – she died of internal bleeding.

This event ruined Christmas that year for our family. It took years for my brother and his sons to even acknowledge the holiday season – it was just too painful.

Now as my nephews have grown and have families of their own all of Katie’s Christmas decorations have come out of storage and adorn the their own family trees. We talk about her at Christmas time and how much she loved the season. In one of my favorite holiday movies, Katie and I used to watch them together, *The Bishop Wife* (the older version with Loretta Young, David Niven and Gary Grant) one of the characters says; “I always find Christmas as a good time for looking backwards.”

It is in looking backwards where our memories of Katie, my parents and numerous others who are no longer with us, come back to life and rather than journey down the road of grief and despair, we relish in the memories of what once was.

Psychologist and author Barbara Lazear Ascher wrote;

“When we are surrounded by the darkest night, there are important coping strategies that counselors, therapists, and similar professionals can provide to help us in through our longest nights, but in my personal experience of losing my father to cancer and of losing friends in tragic accidents, there is a sense in which the return of the light comes slowly, sometimes imperceptibly — growing incrementally, almost unnoticeably like the returning of longer days after Yule. I do not think that time heals all wounds, but sometimes we can find ways of integrating our losses into a new sense of ourselves and the world. We cannot always know the way in advance.”

“Integrating our losses and creating a new sense of ourselves and our place in the world,” are indeed the beginnings to the return of the light. There is no doubt that this journey will take sometime and pounds of patience. For my family it took years for my brother to be able to actually celebrate Christmas again. The first thing he had to do was to get sober himself – this took a few years – at best. Once past that immense obstacle he was able to begin the process of integrating his loss and creating a new sense of himself in his new world of sobriety..

Was he able to finally find some peace at Christmas time – absolutely!
Now with two young grandsons ole Grandpa Pete tells them the story of
Grandma Katie and just how much she loved this time of year.

My friends, the return of the winter months and the holiday season year
after year gives us all the opportunity to integrate our losses of that year
and to create and new sense of self as we journey through the cycle of
the seasons. In the bleakness of this season may we all be reminded that
without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing
flowers. We need both. Yes, we need them both.

In this spirit, I invite you to receive a “Blessing for the Longest Night”
written by the artist Jan Richardson. This blessing is written in the hope
that being authentic and honest about our experience of having a Blue
Christmas or a Longest Night can be part of what leads us — sometimes
without us knowing how or why in advance — to a different time, a
different place, and a different space in on our journey through this life.

I offer you this blessing:

...This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away
but it knows

its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel
in the company
of a friend....

This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.

If the night is dark enough, you can trust that any direction you go, you
will be walking toward the dawn.

Amen and Blessed Be.