



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Quietly, Beneath the Snow...”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Isaiah 55: 1-3, 6-11; Romans 11: 25-36

May 4, 2025

It was a few months ago, now, that Sue Dew came to Trinny and me with a song she had found for the Uker-ists to share in worship. She really wanted to do it. The question, of course, was when and how it best fit into the worship life of the church. When I sat down to listen to this song after Sue shared it with us, I was taken by it. I like the folksy feel of it, and it did sound like it would lend itself well to our group. What really grabbed my attention, however, was the two themes of ‘leaning into the light’ that I heard in the song and, even more than that, these little nuggets of wisdom and challenge that emerge in the lyrics. So, that’s when I jumped in and made their initial offering of this song into a whole bigger thing than they ever asked for or anticipated.

This isn’t a song for a day, I suggested, it’s a song for a season! All of sudden their music wasn’t being shared for one day but would frame our spring worship as we close out this program year. We will spend five weeks on it between now and June 8, at which point we will come back to that song with our Uker-ists again (that time, hopefully, with you all singing along). In the meantime, we’re going to reflect on some of these lyrics as we talk a little about what it means to lean into the light of God in the midst of darkness we know, and we’re going to talk a bit about what means to lean into being the light that God shines into the darkness of others.

And it all starts with those opening words:

Winter is the oldest season

But quietly beneath the snow

Seeds are stretching out and reaching

Faithful as the morning glow.

In a very literal sense, I find myself clinging to that promise here in Wisconsin nearly every year. My mother was always one of those people who loved to say that she adored having all four seasons of the year. I know there are many in this room who likely feel the same way. I’m not that guy. I love spring. I love summer. I love fall. I even love the November/December holiday period of winter. January through March in Wisconsin, however... you can keep them! I’m simply not a fan. And yes, as February drags into March, I’m clinging desperately to my confidence that, although I can’t see it, although the vegetation is either covered in snow or

seemingly long past dead, there's something happening beneath all of that that, by May, will have me struggling to even keep up the with the growth my lawn while my allergies scream bloody murder from the pollen-infested air. Spring is not perfect, and in Wisconsin its arrival is unpredictable to say the least, but as winter drags on, I cling to my confidence that it will come and that even in its imperfections I will know the joys and blessings that it brings.

Now, for you skiers, snowshoers, snowmobilers and otherwise winter enthusiasts, your experience is different, but the point remains – there are times in this life in which we are called upon to cling to the promise of what's happening even though all evidence seems to indicate that it's not happening. And that is, at its heart, what it means to lean into the light of God.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,” Isaiah proclaims as the word of God, “nor are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.” (Isaiah 55: 8-11) “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” Paul proclaims to the Romans. “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.” (Romans 11:33)

The contexts are quite different for these two readings. Isaiah is speaking God's promise into a community that feels forlorn and abandoned in the midst of their exile and oppression. Paul, on the other hand, is speaking to a group of early believers and trying to help them understand the manner in which God has not abandoned them and has seen them through their earthly faltering and on to a heavenly glory. In both cases, however, there is this underlying fundamental message that God's ways are beyond our understanding. Both Isaiah and Paul are making a base argument to their audience that they are not going to fully understand the ways, the whys, the hows, the whens, or the whats of God. If they are going to lean into the light of God, it has to start with a foundational understanding that they are not always going to get it – and neither will we!

*Winter is the oldest season
But quietly beneath the snow
Seeds are stretching out and reaching
Faithful as the morning glow.*

Whether we are talking about leaning into the light of God in the midst of our darkness, or about leaning into bearing the light of God into the darkness of others, it starts with embracing that fundamental sensibility. We have different quips we throw out in its direction – ‘God works in mysterious ways.’ The book of Hebrews suggests that “...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1). The truth, however, is that humanity's ever-growing base of knowledge and understanding makes this one of the most difficult aspects of living as a child of God.

From scientific understandings of the universe... to medical advancements in the diagnosis and treatment of disease... to technological progression... our understanding of this world in which we live is progressing at extraordinary rates, and that's all well and good. There are those who

see science and understanding as the antithesis to seeing God at work in our world. I happen to see it as humanity's ever-growing understanding of God in the world. At some point, however, we have to come to terms with the fact that we will not get it all, and that leaning into the light of God starts with a foundational acceptance of the fact that God's ways are not ours, God's thoughts are higher, and God's wisdom is unsearchable by the human mind.

The first church I ever served was a small church outside of Detroit. Our Easter tradition at that church was that potted lilies would be placed all over the communion table and around the sanctuary for Easter morning worship, and then those who had donated to the floral fund would take flowers home after worship. One Easter morning I arrived to set things up for our service and found that one of the lilies was dead. It seemed as though it had been missed in the watering rotation and paid the price. I wasn't sure if some green thumb might be able to do something with it after the service, so I put some water into it and stuck it around a corner in the chancel where it would be out of view during worship but quickly pulled out as people were headed home. Fast forward a few hours and we are in the middle of our Easter worship, I'm about to invite the children down for a time of talking with them, and out of the corner of my eye I see it. That dead lily was in full, bright, bloom. Not a brown spot on it. Not a dry leaf to be found. Literally in the midst of our Easter service, that plant had gone from death to full life.

Now, that made for a heck of children's message that I was able to share in that moment as I brought down that once-dead and now gorgeous flower. I mention it today, however, because one of the things that I've come to know about the springing of spring is that it always surprises me in some way. It may be the timing. It may be that what seemed to be empty dirt one day is suddenly a towering flower the next. It may be that my lawn goes from a brown field of death to grass too tall to mow in what seems to be a matter of hours. It may be that something I thought was beyond its time suddenly sparks with life anew. It's different each year, but there never seems to be a spring that comes in which I'm not reminded that there was something happening beneath that snow and seeming death of winter that I never understood or even perceived until its new life had taken shape.

There will be moments of our darkness in which it seems that our circumstance is beyond its time. There will be moments in which those around us feel as though such is the truth for them. It is then that we have to remember, however, that God's ways are not ours, God's thoughts are higher, and God's wisdom is unsearchable by the human mind. It is then, that we must remind ourselves that...

*Winter is the oldest season
But quietly beneath the snow
Seeds are stretching out and reaching
Faithful as the morning glow.*