

Reflection and Prayertime: This Year I Won't Get Lost in Darkness

September 27, 2021

There is a band I really like named the Steel Wheels and in non-pandemic times and at this time of year it's not unusual at all for my husband and I to sing at church this song, "Winter Is Coming" (no relation to Game of Thrones).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj2puFC1ssY>

This song always makes me think of people who struggle with depression, bipolar disorder, seasonal depression, and other mental health disorders and for whom the transition to shorter days and longer nights can be very challenging. The line from the song "this year I won't get lost in that darkness" seems to signal a commitment to try for optimal mental and spiritual functioning – a commitment to do everything within one's power to strive for good mental health; and yet, we all know that the exhortation to just cheer up is most often not helpful to someone with a clinical condition.

Yesterday at church, my pastor shared the following: Arthur Brooks in an article from The Atlantic talks about optimism and hope and shared that during the Vietnam war, a U.S. Navy vice admiral who was held for more than seven years in a North Vietnamese prison noticed a surprising trend among his fellow inmates. Some of them survived the appalling conditions; others didn't. Those who didn't tended to be the most optimistic of the group. As the vice admiral, James Stockdale, later said "They were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go ... And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

Among my circle of acquaintances, I have noticed a less dire version of this pattern over the past year and a half, as COVID-19 has slowly transformed from a temporary inconvenience into a new way of life. Those who have struggled the most have been the optimists always predicting a return to normality, only to be disappointed as the pandemic drags on. Some of the people who have done the best have been downright pessimistic about the outside world, but they've paid less attention to external circumstances and focused more on what they could do to persevere. People tend to use hope and optimism as synonyms, but that isn't accurate.

In one 2004 paper in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, two psychologists used survey data to parse the two concepts. They determined that "hope focuses more directly on the personal attainment of specific goals, whereas optimism focuses more broadly on the expected quality of future outcomes in general." In other words, optimism is the belief that things will turn out all right; hope makes no such assumption but is a conviction that one can act to make things better in some way. There's a word for believing you can make things better without distorting reality: not optimism, but hope. Just as Stockdale found—and I've found in a less dramatic way during the pandemic—optimism often isn't the best way to improve your well-being. The research shows that hope is a far more potent force.

Reminds me of a story from John Steinbeck's book, *In Dubious Battle*, where two labor organizers, Jim and Mac, are talking at the end of a long day in which they've almost been killed by vigilantes sent in to break the apple pickers' strike that they've started. Jim looked out through the tent opening. The night seemed grey in contrast with the blackness outside the tent... "D'you think we'll win this strike, Mac?" "We ought to go to sleep; but you know, Jim, I wouldn't have told you this before tonight: No, I don't

think we have a chance to win it. This valley's organized. They'll start shooting, and they'll get away with it. We haven't a chance. I figure these guys here'll probably start deserting as soon as much trouble starts. But you don't want to worry about that, Jim. The thing will carry on and on. It'll spread, and some day – it'll work. Some day we'll win. We've got to believe that."

I believe that Jesus is hopeful like Jim and Mac, "Some day we'll win. We've got to believe that." He said in In Mark 9 Jesus said "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." For everyone will be salted with fire.

Salted with fire? What does that mean? One scholar (Witherington, The Gospel of Mark) says that this saying "has to do with how trials can actually strengthen or preserve Christian character, not merely test it." And of course, salt isn't just a good thing to taste, it's a preservative, and it's used for healing. Salted with fire? Did Jesus mean that going through hard times makes us tastier, richer, stronger in preserving and healing ourselves and others and our world?

Steven Garnaas-Holmes sure explains it well: Salted with fire... Spiced up with passion. Preserved in light. Purified by suffering. Beautified by divine warmth. Refined through pain. Kept in pure being. Seasoned by becoming energy. Enlivened by Spirit. Salted with fire. As I look at that, I think of people who are suffering the most, and I pray that they and we will be salted with the fire that they are experiencing. Salted, in that they will have within them enough energy, enough healing, enough preservation to keep making it through.

A Blessing from Steven Garnaas-Holmes:

"May September's blessings be yours

May the start of new things be deep and fruitful in you.

May the changes in the air bring changes in your heart.

May the lengthening of nights bring deeper peace and rest.

May flocks of geese flying south bring you on a journey toward your own soul.

May falling leaves relieve you of what you do not need.

May new emerging colors spangle your spirit.

May summer's soft departure give you courage to be, and to be without.

May grace bear abundant harvest in your soul, extravagant bushels of belovedness, fit for the table of God."

Here's to a salty spangling of your spirit as you bypass cheap and shallow optimism and actively practice and live into hope. Today and everyday. As the song said, making candles; from all corners bringing light." Thanks be to God.