**Winters of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

The groundhog spoketh.

I rarely attach much weight to the opinions of rodents. Yet, when February rolls around, I do pay some amused attention to the prognostications of a certain Punxsutawney Phil --not to be confused with his less renowned colleagues, Staten Island Chuck, Essex Ed, Buckeye Chuck, and the erstwhile Milltown Mel.

According to ancient European tradition, the weather on Candlemas Day foreshadowed spring’s arrival. When this legend traveled to Germany, hedgehogs got involved. Inexplicable lore evolved pronouncing that if a hedgehog saw his shadow on Candlemas, six more weeks of winter lay ahead.

As German settlors made Pennsylvania their home, they brought this tradition with them. Because groundhogs were more plentiful in Pennsylvania than hedgehogs, meteorological tasks fell to them. Since 1886, the predictions of Punxsutawney Phil have announced to the winter-weary whether the joy of spring lies just around the bend or whether a cold slog through winter still remains.

Because Candlemas 2022 found much of the country digging out from one storm and preparing for another, Punxsutawney Phil’s prediction of six more weeks of winter was unwelcome news. Yet, the desire for winter’s end has me thinking about something more serious than this celebrated critter from the Keystone State.

So often during the winters of life – those seasons of sorrow, hardship, loss or challenge – there is no desire as strong as the hope that such seasons will pass as quickly as possible. We have all known those winters in different ways, as they are an unescapable part of human life. I have always wanted my own winters to pass swiftly, and I hope that spring comes soon for all who are in a long winter of life right now.

Yet, when I look honestly at life, I can also see that those winters are something to be appreciated – even with begrudging reluctance. It is often in the winters of life that some of life’s greatest gifts are given, and I only notice this when I ask myself:

Is it often in the winters of our lives when it is easier to see with more clarity what is important and shed more easily that which is not?

Is it often in the winters of our lives that courage is summoned to do those difficult things that we did not think were possible?

Is it often in the winters of our lives that loved ones are held more tightly and the support of friends and family is relied on a bit more trustingly?

Is it often in the winters of our lives that we grow the most and face life with more strength than before?

Is it often in the winters of our lives that we best understand the suffering of others and notice how heavy are the crosses carried by our fellow travelers through life?

Is it often in the winters of our lives that we are most grateful for the kindnesses of others and see their goodness more clearly?

Is it often in the winters of life that simple pleasures seem the sweetest because they may be the only ones we know?

Is it often in the winters of life that we turn to God most trustingly, knowing how completely dependent we are on Him to see us through to the brightness of a better day?

I have not liked the winters of my life, just as I do not like the icy grip of February. I always wanted them to pass quickly, just as I want to see that first crocus very soon. Yet, winter has a beauty of its own that I know I should not wish away. As much as I do not want to admit it, life’s hard times also have a value all their own.

Honestly, I may still want them to pass quickly – whether they are my own winters or those of others. But…

I also hope for the grace to see more clearly the good in those winters and the gifts that may come in them.

I hope for the grace to know how to walk lovingly with others through their own winters.

I hope for the grace to be more grateful for both the winters and the spring times of life.

I hope for the grace to cry for those whose winters are far longer and far colder than mine have ever been.

Sometimes, the hard times I wish no one would face hold blessings I wish no one would lack. May God bless you with peace, strength and the promise of spring whenever you pass through a winter of your ordinary time.

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