he struggles to provide for his family as a grocery store clerk. Pressured by his wife and children who resent their declining social status, Hawley abandons his integrity in a quest to regain his wealth and power. This is clearly not a story about the winter season, but about a dark, dreary, cold, hard, wintry season of life.

A wintry mood can set in almost any time, bringing feelings of discontent, anxiety, apathy, or a bleak outlook that is not necessarily seasonally related. Wintry moods descend without warning. Wintry moods indicate something going wrong in our lives. Wintry moods may be brought on by physical exhaustion. Wintry moods may be triggered simply by the cumulative weight of modern living. Wintry moods often overtake us for no reason we can discern. The conclusion of something we enjoy, like a career, can bring about a wintry mood as we realize that the thing is over. John’s account of Jesus in the temple invites us to think about the wintry seasons of life.

There is Testament also a story about the winter experience of a relatively unknown man in the Old Testament. In 1 Chronicles 11:22-25, there is a listing of some soldiers who belonged to an elite force called the “Mighty Men.” They were the Seal Team 6 of their day, the special forces unit that served King David. The chapter describes the exploits of individual members, particularly Benaiah (ben-AY-ah), who “went down and killed a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen.”

In those days, many people made their living tending sheep. A marauding lion, therefore, was a matter of real concern, and because it was winter, the small game that lions usually ate were not abundant. Thus sheep, and especially lambs, became a natural target for lions, made all the fiercer by their hunger. Sheepherders had their hands full protecting their flocks. Benaiah, determined to do something about this threat. He tracked the lion through the snow, cornering the ferocious beast in a pit, and slaying it.

Whoever recorded this event felt it important to include the comment that snow had fallen that day. Snow is not nearly as common in that part of the world as it is here, but it does happen. Benaiah’s courage in ridding the countryside of this threat was remarkable; but the bit about the snow perplexed me until I realized that the chronicler was pointing out how Benaiah turned the winter weather to his advantage. While others huddled against the snow, Benaiah used the snow to track the lion.

Metaphorically speaking, we know that there are wintry experiences in our lives: bad news, bad days, bad hair days; days of grief and agony; money problems, health problems, family problems, and the list goes on endlessly. During those wintry times, we may be plagued by the beasts of impatience, a judgmental spirit, a foul temper, and a compulsion to do the wrong thing. Or we may be subject to dark moods, feelings of futility and gloom, or a sense of hopelessness.

We might be able to push away those negative feelings when our lives are going well. When things are all spring and summer our moral muscle and spiritual stamina are relatively unimpaired; but when the wintry winds of adversity blow, we may find that lax attitudes or self-centered ways compound to make matters worse.

As we reflect on Benaiah slaying the lion, we may ask how we can use the hardship of wintry experiences to slay some of our personal lions. Perhaps we need to rethink the role of tragedy or deep pain in our lives? Can we confront and defeat the sufferings, tragedies, and disappointments we encounter? Do the events that challenge us or the people who hurt us somehow make us stronger and more faithful? Are wintry days like a poison that heals?

It is possible to find God and goodness amid hard times. Psalm 74:17 declares, “You [God] have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter.” God is in both things, in all things. Certainly, it is better for God to be part of our wintry times than it is to believe we are abandoned by God in such moments. When the winter of our discontent descends, the experiences that chill our souls and send our spirits into hibernation, show us how God works through adversity to teach us and heal us.

Kathleen Norris, an essayist on the spiritual life, suggests using the word “apocalypse” to characterize the wintry times that highlight the cracks in our lives. She writes: “We know that marriages, families, communities, nations often come together and discover their true strength when some apocalypse — some new revelation of the fault lines in our lives — has occurred….For some reason, we human beings seem to learn best how to love when we’re a bit broken, when our plans fall apart, when our myths of our self-sufficiency and goodness and safety are shattered. Apocalypse is meant to bring us to our senses, allowing us a sobering, and usually painful, glimpse of what is possible in the new life we build from the ashes of the old.”

There can be a fine line between wintry troubles that teach us good things and troubles that destroy our spirit entirely. Some people are so devastated by wintry times that they become bitter and sour about life; but others learn new things, and we should not buy into the notion that suffering cannot be redemptive. Some of the most compassionate and caring people we know are those who faced some very rough times, and indeed, that is often the experience of those who follow Christ. Repeatedly, in the depths of trouble, we find that Jesus is walking beside us. When we believe that God is not far from us in the wintry experiences of life, we may even be able to use those apocalyptic times to slay the lions of impatience, too much ego, too little ego, a harsh spirit, a foul temper, or too little faith and lean into the new life God offers us.

Norris explicitly used the word *apocalypse* to describe times of trouble because “apocalypse” comes from the Greek word for “uncovering” or “revealing.” Norris says the point of an apocalypse is not to frighten us into submission to a scary God, but to “teach us to think about ‘next-year-country’ in a way that sanctifies our lives here and now.” Norris explains that next-year-country is a common phrase in the western Dakotas, where she lives part of each year. The term describes the circumstances that the farmers and ranchers of that area live with, as in, “next year rains will come at the right time; next year I won’t get hailed out; next year winter won’t set in before I have my hay hauled in for winter feeding.” Next-year-country is shorthand for hope.

Norris adds, “I don’t know a single person on the land who uses the idea of ‘next year’ as an excuse not to keep reading the earth, not to look for the signs that mean that you’ve got to get out and do the field work when the time is right.” Her insight provides us with a way to respond to the apocalyptic winters of our lives by paying closer attention to the world around us and cultivating the earth of our hearts for what we can learn from our wintry experiences.

Do we have a cranky neighbor? Maybe that is an opportunity to slay our impatience. Is our marriage in rough waters? Perhaps that is a chance to slay our tendency to interpret matters only from our own viewpoint. Is someone criticizing our beliefs or politics? Choose to reset a critical spirit and find new ways to dialogue. Are our kids frustrating? Make the time for meaningful conversations. Whatever is causing the winter of our discontent, next-year-country thinking will reframe the experience with hope.

Prayer: God of Summer and Winter, Springtime and Harvest, thank You for the glorious truth that Christ spoke, that He and You are one. Thank You that in His humanity, Jesus demonstrated how I may live as You intend all Your children to live, in total dependence, joyful obedience, and full submission to Your Spirit’s will. May I follow Christ's example, until like the apostle Paul, I may say, "It is not I that live in this body, but Christ Who lives in me." In Jesus' name, AMEN.

**Source:** Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 318-321.

**The Winter of Our Apocalypse**

Sunday, May 11, 2025 John 10:22-42

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The story of Jesus being in the temple includes a small detail easily overlooked. John writes, “It was winter.” John tells us that rather than teaching out in the open among the people, Jesus was walking in a sheltered place, the portico of Solomon, because the weather was wintry. Being in this confined space made it possible for Jesus’ adversaries, the chief priests and Pharisees, to surround him and demand answers (see John 7:45; 11:47). Bible translator J.B. Phillips says the religious leaders “closed in on him.” This was not a friendly crowd. They cornered Jesus, demanding to know if he was the promised Messiah of God.

The closer Jesus got to Jerusalem, the colder the reception to his ministry. As Jesus moved steadily toward the cross, confrontations with the religious leaders intensified. The conflict escalated to the point where Jesus’ adversaries picked up rocks, ready to stone him to death. They did not object to Jesus doing good works, although they did object to him healing on the Sabbath. Their primary objection was Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah. Jesus defended himself against their charge of blasphemy, saying, “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” At this, the religious leaders attempted to arrest Jesus, but he eluded their grasp (John 10:37-39).

The wintry opposition to Jesus’ ministry continued. When he raised Lazarus from the dead, many people believed Jesus to be the Messiah. The religious leaders feared this growing body of believers would cause the Romans to perceive Jesus as a rival king, provoking them to “destroy both our holy place and our nation” (John 11:48). Jesus forced the matter by making his triumphal Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. The religious leaders plotted in secret to kill Jesus (John 11:53) and by the end of that week, he was crucified.

Sometimes we face our own wintry seasons that have nothing to do with the time of year. William Shakespeare famously opened his play, *Richard III*, with the phrase, "Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this sun [or son] of York." Spoken by the Duke of Gloucester, who is later revealed to be King Richard III, the line celebrates a new era, where the "winter" of conflict ends, and a brighter "summer" begins with the arrival of the York dynasty. John Steinbeck used Shakespeare’s words as the title of his novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, to describe the struggles of Ethan Allen Hawley in the days between Good Friday and the Fourth of July. When Hawley loses the family fortune,