

Winter Light

Winter has always held an attraction for both of us and more so since coming to live in Scotland where the winter days are yet shorter, and the nights longer. An exploration of Winter Light seemed appropriate for this season of sabbatical when we have lived in a temperature range of -10°C to +10°C with the length of daylight varying from 6 hours 50 minutes on the shortest day through to 10 hours 25 minutes on Sunday 26th February.

During the sabbatical we have prepared a Winter Light liturgy which is offered for use in churches for ten weeks from the first Sunday of Advent until the Sunday nearest to Candlemas (2nd February). Presented as short videos of around 5 minutes in length, this will be distributed next autumn and available on request.



The following pages are offered here as additional reflections and images; there is no set way to use them, and no prize for reading them all! Browse through as you wish, some are more serious than others, some, we hope, might trigger thinking and ideas which you could follow-up in any winter. Some are pure self-indulgence.

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Wounded in spirit: Advent Art and Meditations

I was on Byers Road in Glasgow, looking through the window of Oxfam Books in January 2022 and this book, **Wounded in spirit** by David Bannon, caught my eye. An advent guide, using the lives of painters (most of whom I had never heard of) to invite people to engage with the season of advent through the lens of woundedness, more specifically through the painters' grief. This meant taking seriously the reality of darkness in our longing for God's coming to us in Christ. For Jill and me, working with advent at a time of sabbatical, there was connection with our own woundedness, including our own grief. It became for us a book of Advent hope – and we share with you our connections with a few of the paintings and painters. *(We have included images downloaded from the internet here to illustrate our notes, but clearly for any wider use, copyright permissions would be needed).*

Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)

Caspar knew death. His mother died when he was seven, one sister when he was eight, another when he was seventeen, but the event which marked him took place when he was twelve. His younger brother, aged eleven, died in saving Caspar when the ice gave way as they were both skating. This loss, in which he saw himself as responsible, he found impossibly hard to live with.



From this place comes the revolution in romantic art, in which religion is taken from the confines of church buildings. There is a cross in the mountains, the crucified God in the natural world. There is a sense of isolation, figures often portrayed alone, with their back turned to the observer. The context of a winter landscape with its raw beauty and terror enable Caspar to bring us to an encounter with the God who is in the wilderness of life's experience.

“Close your bodily eye so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye, then bring to the light of day that which you have seen in the darkness” was Caspar's advice to young artists. On this advent journey we will catch something quite profound in the darkness – and are challenged to bring that to the light of day.

Andrew

Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)



Millet's painting “The Angelus” shows a young peasant couple who have laid down their tools as they worked in the fields and stand with bowed heads, praying. A distant church steeple gives the clue that the afternoon “Angelus” bell is ringing, a signal at which the painter remembers his grandmother doing precisely this, and making her grandchildren do it too. That is the story Millet told to explain the painting and its title. Salvador Dali, however, believed there was more to it. He pointed out that the posture of the young couple is a posture of mourning and that the sack of potatoes which lies between them is

suggestive of a child's coffin. Dali was eventually successful in his campaign to investigate and the Louvre subjected the painting to X-ray analysis, discovering that indeed a small coffin had been overpainted with the potatoes, and the church steeple added.

Bannon relates something of the story of Millet's life, but he uses the title "Truth is often hidden" for his reflection on this image as Millet himself clearly chose not to explain the loss which the painting originally revealed and later concealed. How true. Since Peter's death I have had so many conversations with people who are also the survivors of bereavement by suicide but who have hardly ever told anyone else the circumstances of their loss. How many of us choose to hide the truth behind a bland, "I'm fine"? Recognising the hiddenness of truth in those around us might just make us a little more gentle in how we treat each other?

Jill

Jan Massys (c. 1510-1575)



The reflection on the work of Jan Massys, a Flemish painter, shocked me as I read that several of Jan's relatives were found guilty of reading the Bible in the vernacular, and, as that was a capital offence, were executed – his uncle by decapitation, his aunt by being buried alive. Jan himself was banished from Antwerp. That the church could ever have stayed so far from the gospel as to murder people for reading the bible – in whatever language – is a cause for lament.

Perhaps it was through their art that both Quentin and Jan found subtler ways to run counter-cultural to the legalistic piety of the church of their day. Jan chose scenes of scandal from the Old Testament to paint (and let's not pretend there isn't plenty of such material available) and was possibly the first artist to paint Mary and Joseph being rejected in Bethlehem. Maybe he was reflecting on the injustice he had experienced himself as he titled the painting "Hospitality refused". Lord have mercy if we the church, or if I as a disciple of Jesus, ever take the side of law over grace!

Jill

Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610)

Adam, one of ten children painted *Flight to Egypt* in 1605. Bannon describes it as uninteresting: Mary exhausted, child playful, Joseph distant – perhaps a reflection of the painter's experience of family life. He married Carola in 1606, and they had a son in 1609, who died later that year. It was then that he



produced his final painting, with the same subject – his masterpiece *The Flight into Egypt* – oil on copper, delicate, 12 inches by 16 inches. I was fascinated by it and by the transformation evidenced in the painter. It is a painting of a night-time scene, with four light sources: the full moon, the moon's reflection in a lake, a campfire and Joseph's torch. Yet there is a glorious canopy of tiny stars and a stunning, guiding milky way. There is an intimacy in the holy family, which knows of struggle and love.

Those who know something of the darkness of loss, of the tenderness of family, of the inspiration in the night sky may find in this painting that they can travel with Adam and the holy family on a journey of hope – perhaps lighting a fire, glimpsing a reflection and knowing the flickering torch of Immanuel. Adam died the following year, leaving his wife (and us) with this image of hope.

Andrew

Paying attention in winter

What if our diaries mean we do not give opportunity to notice, to pay attention? Perhaps I have learned a little of what it might mean to notice over these months in the Highlands.



To notice the **moon's** cycle, being aware of where we are on that cycle: new or full, waxing or waning, crescent or gibbous. Recognising how the moon's cycle affects the tides and how clearly the stars can be seen.

To notice the **clouds** and their colours and shapes, the speed with which they are travelling, the weather with which they threaten us or which they promise us.



To notice the **frost** and the beauty in the way it clothes the world; the jewels shining in the winter sunshine on tree and grass.



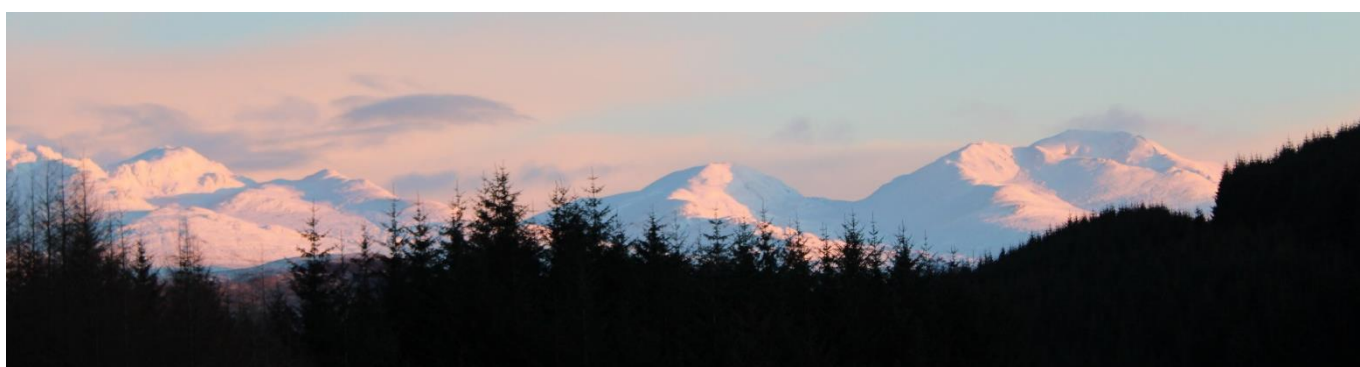
To notice the shapes identified by the ancient people formed by the **stars** in the sky: the great and small bears, Cassiopeia, Taurus, Pleiades, Gemini. To wonder at Orion the Hunter and the sparkling light of Sirius. To be lost in wonder.

To notice
how the
light catches
the hill as
the dawn
breaks...



...and makes the sea
spray dance as it
crashes against the
sea wall at high tide.

To notice is to realise we are alive and part of this universe, part of the drama which unfolds every day in the rhythm of the year.



Andrew



What on earth made that? A huge claw print scratched in the snow, right at the end of a rocky crag – more than one in fact. Perhaps six inches from front to back...? (Okay, perhaps four, wish I'd taken a photo). I imagine an eagle, okay a buzzard, or maybe only a raven, but a big bird, marching to this lofty height and throwing itself off into the currents of air. Wow.

Who are we following now?

Paw prints... scratch marks... inexplicable indentations... the snow captures for us activity which was long over by the time we clomped our way onto the hillside, scaring away everything within half a mile... but while the snow remains and the temperature stays well below zero (as it has been for over a week) we can notice and imagine and do a little research. Hares, rabbits, sheep, deer are relatively easy to identify and now I discover that the delicate lines fanning out from either side of a bird's prints are where a grouse has used its wings to help it take flight. Wow.



When will the rain stop? It's been a particularly wet January week and we're missing the snow. Then we read, in Hebrews 6:7 *Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.* This gives us pause for thought – are we that ground perhaps, soaking up the showers (and torrents) of blessings which this sabbatical has given us; might this time produce a crop which could be of use and be blessed by God?



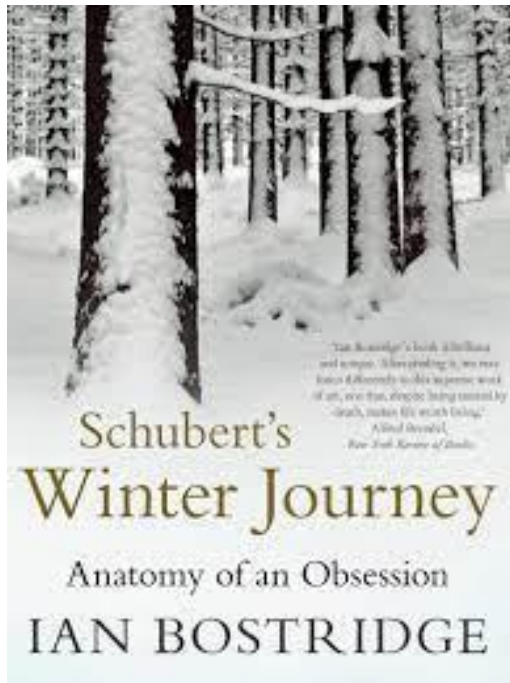
Will we ever see the Northern Lights? The news tells us (always after the event of course) that the Northern Lights were clearly seen in Shetland last night... or on the Moray Coast (where we went last week to look for them) or even in Edinburgh would you believe? But we still haven't seen them. Living in a glen, even at the head of a glen, doesn't help – we don't have a clear northern horizon... and we probably should tear ourselves away from the fire more often in our cosy evenings... As the American poet Annie Dillard writes (in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*): "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."

Jill

Music: *Winterreise* by Franz Schubert

My appreciation of this melancholy work was enhanced by a remarkable volume by Ian Bostridge called *Anatomy of Obsession*. Bostridge is the soloist on the recording I used.

The songs take us on the traveller's winter journey through snow and ice, a journey defined by the opening, "Gute Nacht" in which he leaves his beloved's house (evicted or of his own choosing, we never ascertain).



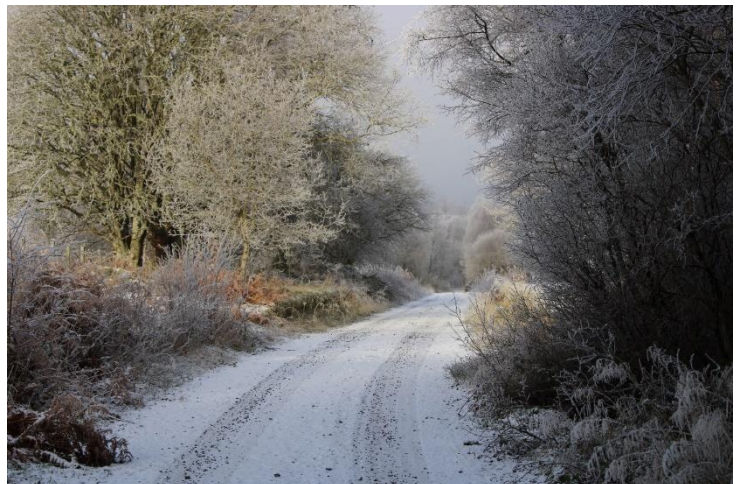
For my journey I cannot
choose my own time;
I must pick the way myself
through this darkness.
My mooncast shadow acts
as my companion
and on the white meadow
I look for deer's footprints.

Gute Nacht (Good Night) 2nd verse

We catch glimpses of passion, depression, determination and resignation as Schubert expertly takes us on this (at times breathless) journey. Schubert's genius in bringing the words and music together drew me into the narrative.

There are echoes of the reactionary period in German history following Napoleon as well as Schubert's own story - his personal love life was far from settled - which led to his death in his early thirties.

I wondered on a first hearing how it might connect with my context. Then I found myself singing out loud along with the astonishing Bostridge . . . and tears were also not far away at times.



Andrew

The rhythms of winter

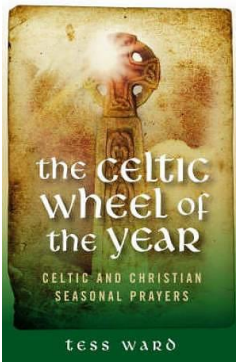
There are relatively few mentions of winter in the bible, but in a verse like Genesis 8:22 it features as part of the rhythm of the year; *'As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'* Or in Psalm 74:12 it illustrates the way in which God oversees creation; *'You have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter.'*

Living for three months in one place with very little in the diary meant we developed various rhythms to give shape to the week. Our morning Prayers in bed (noticing how the time of dawn changed over the time, and, once it was light, watching the birds on the feeders) became the first of each day's "Three Ps" (the others being Planking – possibly the worst three minutes of the day – and Porridge).

The rhythm of walking played its part every day to varying degrees and we both find great therapy and joy in that 'Left foot, right foot' rhythm – even on wet and misty days when the summits were obscured and the view diminished. We were mindful of the blessings of having strength and energy as well as an abundance of interesting routes straight from the cottage to choose for our walks.

Sometime later in the day we would light the log burner and sit down with our afternoon readings; a chapter from one of the gospels first, read aloud, then a portion of the letter to the Hebrews and finally some sort of devotional reading, using different books during the three months. After some conversation on the readings we took time in quiet to make our own written notes and reflections. Precious and life-giving rhythms.

'The Celtic wheel of the year' by Tess Ward revolves (😊) around this sense of rhythm and I particularly found its approach helpful, looking at each month of the year, highlighting and giving background on the special days within it, then providing one week of an eight-part daily liturgy for each month. I loved this added sense of shape to those days:



- On rising: a sentence to begin the day once we were properly awake.
- Praising: a prayer of adoration and praise to help us look to God.
- In stillness: a one-line invitation to be quiet and listen...
- Morning invocation: calling on God to accompany us through the day
- Opening out: usually looked at when we began our afternoon readings
- Thanksgiving: an invitation at the end of the day to name three blessings
- Night shielding: a prayer of trust and of putting things down before the night
- Blessing: last words before sleep

Most of the other mentions of winter in the bible are reminders or warnings that winter is not the best time to travel. In Songs of Songs (2:10-12) the lover invites their beloved to come away *'for now the winter is past'*; Jesus speaks of the harshness of the end times and advises the crowd to *'Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath.'* (Matthew 24:20). Travel was more difficult in winter; the final chapters of the Acts of the Apostles demonstrate that Paul was wary of travelling in this season and writing to Timothy he says, *'Do your best to come before winter'* (2 Timothy 4:2). There is even, I think, a suggestion that, like us, Paul felt the winter was a time to hunker down and stay put somewhere safe: in Titus he writes, *'When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there'* and in the first letter to the Corinthians, *'Perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go'* (1 Corinthians 16:6). I hope he enjoyed and benefitted from the rhythms of his winter sabbatical as much as we have! Jill

Cloud, darkness and mystery

This was to be three months of no planning, no preparation, no performing; not judging or being judged; not failing or succeeding. Then I entered the cloud.



The cloud which looked back at thirty years of planning, preparing, performing, of judging and being judged, of failing and even succeeding.



It felt quite painful to enter the cloud and catch something of the futility of it all. "Vanity, vanity . . ." I echoed in the cloud the words from Ecclesiastes. The day was the one when I was in the hills and I saw the darkness coming to me on the north wind, heavy clouds full of snow. I turned for home and safety and time and space to think this through. There was no logical answer to my entering the cloud of futility. Many years on sabbatical would not have made everything right, sorted out the story of my life and given it clear meaning and purpose.

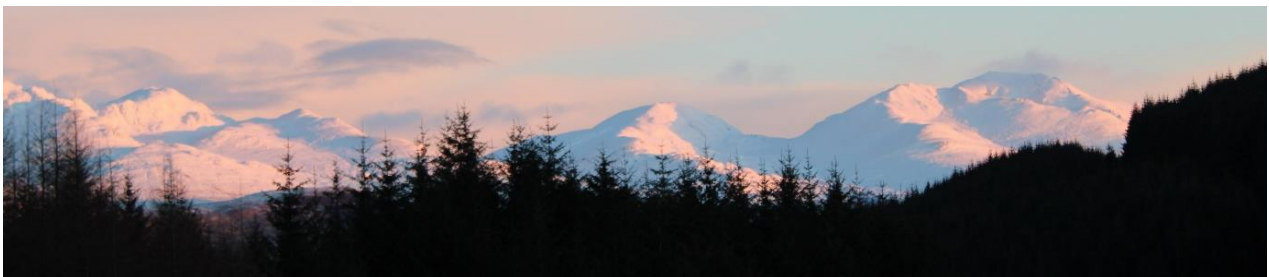
In the long dark evening times by the fire, in the walking in the wilderness of snow, ice, wind, rain and mist I encountered the God of grace.

In the reading of Hebrews and all the gospels something of Jesus came to me saying how much I am loved and that God's grace is enough.

In the novels I have read, the companionship of Jill, the conversations with strangers I have discovered again the joy of life in all its fullness.



Life to be lived without judging or the fear of being judged. Just being held and choosing goodness.



I do not understand this wonderful and terrible world, but I can live with the mystery. I do not need to understand, but I want to explore the wonder and terror of what it means to be alive and to be called to be a minister in these coming days.

Andrew

Spell songs – The Snow Hare and Charm on, Goldfinch



In 2017 the writer Robert Macfarlane and the artist Jackie Morris collaborated on a book called *the lost words*, seeking to remind us of the beauty and depth of meaning in many simple words from the natural world – from acorn to wren. In 2020 came *the lost spells* which is described as the ‘little sister’ book of *the lost words* and its companion piece, *spell songs*, a book and CD on which many of the poems are set to music, written and performed by a group of musicians with varied backgrounds. During our Winter Light sabbatical I became entranced by this music, in particular two tracks:

[The Snow Hare](#) tells the story of the elusive mountain hare whose fur turns white in winter, the better to hide from the preying eagle or buzzard. Better only if there is snow, of course, and without explicitly mentioning climate change, the song gently laments the unpredictability of snowfall in 21st-century winters, so in the final verse, the hare ‘hides on the highest hill’ and ‘prays for the veil of snow to come and cover him over’.



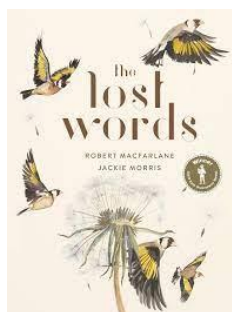
We know that mountain hares live on the slopes around our cottage – we have seen their tracks in the snow many, many times, but I have never yet seen a hare here. Perhaps my eyesight is not sharp enough, perhaps they are just too quick for me, perhaps they are too still for me

to spot as they ‘hunker down’ amidst the snowy heather on the slopes.

The writers of the song (Julie Fowlis and Karine Polwart) suggest in *spell songs* that there is a parallel to be drawn here with the fragile Gaelic language, and link this into the song using the translations of some Gaelic place names where hares are known to be found, all in Perthshire; Loch nan Eun, *the Loch of the Birds* and Càrn a’ Gheòidh, *the Cairn of the Goose*. The introduction to ‘the lost spells’ beings, ‘This is a book of spells to be spoken aloud...’ so with that idea in mind I learned *The Snow Hare* so that I could sing it (softly) as I was out on the hills in the hope that it might summon up the animal itself... so far it hasn’t worked, but I won’t give up!

[Charm on, Goldfinch.](#)

Goldfinches grace the cover of *the lost words* but are not frequent visitors to our bird feeders here.



However, they do pass by occasionally and that little flash of scarlet on the head calls me to pay close attention to their presence and enjoy their beauty. I planted some teasel plants eighteen months ago in the hope of attracting more of these little charmers to eat the seeds in the heads. The plants grew to about six feet and flowered abundantly, but so far no noticeable increase in the goldfinch population... again I shall keep trying! There is something about the elusiveness of certain species which adds to their charm and makes us more determined to seek them out.

During our sabbatical visit to the Moray Coast, where we spent a week in January, we visited the RSPB reserve at Troup Head and there were beguiled by several goldfinches accompanying us along the path. Robert Macfarlane’s poem and Beth Porter’s song dedicated to the Goldfinch in *spell songs* are both equally enchanting. “Charm”, the collective noun for goldfinches is cleverly used in the chorus; ‘Charm on, goldfinch, charm on. Heaven help us when all your gold is gone...’ Reading that this was written as Macfarlane sat with his 101-year old grandmother in the last days of her life adds further poignancy and emotion to an already enchanting little song.

Jill

Winter and Wood



Fires in winter declare that we shall not allow the cold to overwhelm us. We will light a bonfire, using the wood that is dry as a start and feeding it with the wet stuff. We may cook a casserole on it. We will gather round it and tell stories, memories evoked of old times, previous winters. There is laughter – and sometimes tears (for the memories are inhabited by those no longer here). The longest night demands a bonfire. The light will return.

Wood has been a feature of the winter. I took a silver birch down and sawed it into seven lengths with a chain saw. The same saw brought those lengths to life as I exposed the pale wood and burnt faces onto them. Jill painted head coverings – and a family of nativity figures emerged from the tree. They drew us to gather at a stable and sing praises to the new-born Saviour of the world. The birch tree which gave Christmas life to this family.



By late afternoon, the sun was setting and we made our way to the sitting room and the orange glow of the log burner. Logs were in demand this winter because of the price of other fuel. December was very cold – and many logs were needed. Order more than! The only remaining logs were wet . . . we needed a system of drying the logs before they could be place on the embers. It seems to have worked – the heat from the burner has kept us warm through this winter.

Andrew

Gardening in winter



One friend, who knew we were spending the winter in our cottage, wrote in her Christmas card, “after three months there, I’m sure your garden will look a picture”. I smiled when I read it; looking out of the window, the garden was indeed a picture – a picture of deep snow!

For several weeks the only gardening which could be undertaken was the gentle shaking of shrubs and trees to dislodge the vast quantities of snow which threatened to break off branches (and in many cases did so, when I hadn’t noticed in time).

Once some of the snow had melted, however, I dug out my gardening gloves, forced three pairs of them onto my hands and, somewhat encumbered by this very necessary precaution, potted around the garden for an hour or so. It was exhilarating and much to be recommended. In a largely monochromatic world, any colour drew the eye, and the few cotoneaster berries which the birds had not eaten (perhaps because they were too near to the road) had the value of jewels. The clear air of the Highlands stimulates lichen in abundance – prettier than any tinsel. And look, here beneath the snow a brave hellebore has some buds. Deciding that any more snow might finish them off I took the risk and picked them instead – and was provided with a little vase of winter treasure to bring indoors which lasted for weeks.



At Christmas Martha and I braved the cold to decorate a little outdoor tree as a gift for the birds; hollowed-out half-oranges filled with lard, breadcrumbs, dried fruit, seeds and porridge oats were a great hit, once the birds realised what they were! The tinsel comprised peanuts in their shells threaded on wool and took a little more effort on the part of the birds, but they rose to the challenge! More twigs of berries wired together as an edible star topped the tree. I’m still not sure who enjoyed this most – Martha, me or the birds.

The next project on my list of winter gardening activities is to build a little bug hotel – living on what was once a railway yard means there are always old bricks to be dug up, just below the surface, and interspersed with some lengths of bamboo that might encourage a few more pollinators into the garden, ready for spring.

Stories:

The Dark is Rising – Susan Cooper



As our Winter light sabbatical began, I was excited to discover that BBC radio were dramatizing the 1973 children’s fantasy novel, [The Dark is Rising](#) by Susan Cooper over the Christmas period. The second of a series of five novels which make up *The Dark is Rising* sequence, the story has stayed in my memory since reading it to my two boys, Tim and Peter, around twenty years ago. [The dramatization](#) was the work of Robert Macfarlane (see also ‘spell songs’) and Simon McBurney and was scheduled to go out in twelve short episodes late at night, starting on 21st December 2022. This date is, of course, the Winter Solstice, the date when the action of the book begins in one snowy, dark, memorable Christmas season. Tim, Hannah and Martha were staying with us at the time, so Tim and I resolved to stay up late each night and listen, sitting in the dark by the embers of the log burner. Perfect!

Except that, when it came to it, we were both so tired by that stage of the day that we found it difficult to stay awake in the dark and focus on the mellifluous voice of McBurney as narrator, along with a great cast including the brilliant Toby Jones as ‘the walker’. So we had to abandon that plan and instead Andrew and I listened to it over six evenings in January whilst staying in a tiny cottage on the Moray Coast which had, on its top floor, a small observatory. So we sat in the dark, with views of the night sky, as we entered into this fantasy world where ‘the dark’ – the power of evil – is definitely rising, and it falls to young Will Stanton, as he reaches his eleventh birthday on the shortest day, to become the ‘Sign-seeker’ and, working with other ‘Old Ones’ (who belong to the Light) to defeat the dark.



Light and dark are powerful metaphors for good and evil, and ones which we find throughout scripture, especially in John’s Gospel. Coming to this story in 2022 I found my own theology and understanding of light and dark have changed since reading it to two eager boys on Caribbean evenings long ago. Discovering Barbara Brown Taylor’s, *Learning to walk in the dark* and other similar books, along with a deeper exploration of the idea found in Isaiah 45:3 that there may be ‘treasures of darkness’, my thinking is now much more nuanced and I would want to defend the darkness from always being associated with evil. Darkness is part of the rhythm of life and as necessary to us as is light. A tree pushes its roots down into the darkness at the same time as reaching its branches towards the light; seeds, bulbs and babies all begin their development in the dark; we too grow and heal while we sleep – usually in darkness. God is no stranger to darkness either – so many exciting stories in the bible take place in the dark, not least the birth and death of Jesus himself. In the Old Testament, God is understood to dwell in “thick darkness” (1 Kings 8:12) in the Ark of the Covenant... I could go on!

Nevertheless, *The Dark is Rising* is a great story and did much to enhance my reflections on Winter Light (and Winter Darkness) over this time of sabbatical.

The Shortest Day – Susan Cooper

Again by Susan Cooper, the 2019 children's book, *The Shortest Day* is aimed at much younger children (as well as adults of any age) and uses the text of a poem written originally for theatre performances in America (where Cooper now lives) as a celebration of the shortest day. The Winter Solstice has fascinated us for years, this fulcrum of the year when everything turns; the short days begin to lengthen as the long nights get just a minute or two shorter every day.



Since buying the cottage in 2016 we have begun a tradition of having an outside bonfire on all the Quarter Days – the two equinoxes of March 21st and September 21st and the two solstices on 21st June and December (apologies if that sounds just a little pagan – but my understanding is that God directs the motion of the earth, moon and planets, so all these special days are God's idea and in celebrating them we celebrate the ingenuity of our Creator!) Of all these four bonfires, it is the Winter Solstice that is the greatest fun, for then the sky is as dark as it can get, and the

flames seem correspondingly brighter, their warmth all the more welcome for the cold air – and possibly snow – around!

In 2022, the Shortest Day also served a helpful purpose as a pre-Christmas celebration with the family who arrived late on 20th. Wanting to hold back on some Christmas decorations and food until at least Christmas Adam (the affectionate name given to the day before Christmas Eve in the Caribbean – I'm sure you can work out why!) we focused on the Solstice for our initial festivities. Martha, at five, was excited to be St Lucy for the day, following the old custom of celebrating this saint's day on the shortest day. There are various stories of St Lucy – the version we found most palatable for a small girl was that, dressed in white, she helped the Christians in captivity in the catacombs of Rome, taking them food



and wearing a wreath of candles on her head so that her hands were free to serve. The red sash indicates her status as a Christian martyr – a part of the story we didn't labour! Our menus for the day followed the theme – rising sun pancakes for breakfast, midday sun poached eggs for lunch, casserole with setting sun dumplings for supper. This latter was meant to be by the traditional solstice bonfire, but the weather had other ideas and it would have taken the faith of Elijah to try to light a fire in the torrential rain... so the

fire was postponed to the other end of the longest night and we sat around it eating our porridge and welcoming the sun back on the morning of 22nd.

But back to the book! Beautifully illustrated by Carson Ellis it has won prizes and offers itself as a vehicle for families and communities to use the shortest day to come together and celebrate the rhythm of life, along with people throughout history;

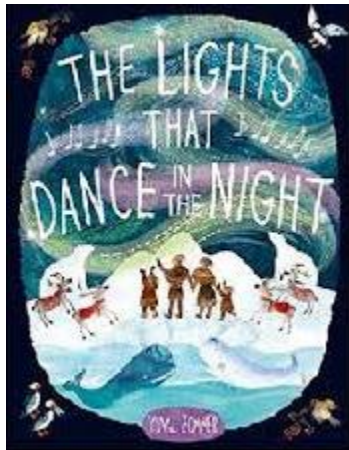
'and when the new year's sunshine blazed awake,
They shouted, revelling.

Through all the frosty ages you can hear them
Echoing, behind us – listen!



The Lights that Dance in the Night – Yuval Zommer

One of our great hopes of the sabbatical (unrealised I'm afraid) was to see the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis. Our week on the Moray Coast was booked with this in mind but it was a cloudy week and, as everyone told us when we were there, "You should have been here last week"!



Something of the magic and glory of this remarkable phenomenon is captured in the delightful children's book, *The Lights that Dance in the Night* by Yuval Zommer, which we found in that most excellent bookshop, the Watermill in Aberfeldy.

The illustrations are beautiful – arctic hares even feature – and the book's emphasis throughout is on the way in which the Northern Lights bring joy to whoever or whatever sees it ('our dancing lights made whales sing and bells on boats began to ring'). The lights (who



narrate the book) claim that they came 'illuminating darkness, keeping hope aflame' and describe themselves as "a miracle of winter" – as indeed I'm sure they must be. I'm not giving up hope just yet.

Yes, light, any light, but especially these spectacular lights, can bring joy and hope and our exploration of Winter Light affirmed this time and time again, but it is surely because of the winter darkness that these lights are so visible, so special and so welcome.

Jock the Fox in the Tartan Socks – a wee fable by Susan Cohen



It was a rather unprepossessing little gallery in Port Appin which (amazingly) was open on a Sunday afternoon in December which led us to the discovery of this shining children's story after worshipping at St. Oran's Church of Scotland, Connell. We were leaving the shop with one greeting card (all we could afford) when I spotted the books in a basket on the floor and, after a quick glance through, was in no doubt that this simple tale had a story for our Winter Light sabbatical.

The opening page indicates the book's inspiration – a short quotation from the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Rumi, 'Don't you know yet? It's your light that lights the world' and the book goes on to do great justice to that idea. I don't want to spoil it for you by telling the story, so suffice it to say that the exploration of darkness and light, of sadness and happiness, of feeling lost and feeling found is heart-warming and the fact that the principal action is that of climbing 'higher than high' made it fitting for our mountain setting.

Best of all, Jock does not keep his newfound discoveries to himself, but shares them with his special friends, Pippa McGatt, the tiny wee bat, Roger McCadger, the big-hearted badger and Lorna McCowell, the clever night owl. All experience what we might want to term transfiguration and will never be the same again – even if their lives don't change that much on the outside. Sounds like a gospel story to me!



A Winter Booklist

***Wintering* by Katherine May**

Wintering was forced upon the author by ill health; her ideas for seizing this season were helpful prompts for us. The significance of cold. Appreciation of the shortest day and an introduction to St Lucy. Snow as a catalyst for joy. Regular sea-bathing!

***The Nature of Winter* by Jim Crumley**

Writing out of an experience of the mild winter of 2018; fascinated by his insistence that when we connect with our natural environment, it “speaks” if we are attentive to it. Vivid descriptions of buzzards, ravens, egrets and an invitation to experience the Cairngorms and the Trossachs through his writing. As often in this genre, there is a tendency for the personality of the writer to get in the way of the message – something to be wary of in my own writing and speaking.

***Frostquake* by Juliet Nicolson (daughter of the Sackville-Wests)**

Experience of the winter of 1962-63 at Sissinghurst and in the shaping Britain at the time. Politics around Profumo, Macmillan, Kennedy, Wilson. Mania around the Beatles. Lots of stuff that someone of my age should know about, but which was very hazy before I read the book! A good read.

***Winter, liturgical resources for November, December and January* by Ruth Burgess**

What a treasure here for the soul in these winter months. Jill and I read to each other from this book, catching something of the mystery and wonder of the reality of God in the winter. We were moved by Ruth Burgess’ blessings, the sometimes stark poetry which was honest about winter’s possibilities for joy and pain. Here were resources for use in church too.

***Poems and prayers for winter* by Mary Fleeson**

This tiny book from the Lindisfarne Scriptorium (A6 in size and only 16 pages in length) has a beady-eyed robin on its cover – and the contents are as charming, mercurial and heart-warming as the companionship of this favourite little bird. Both words and illustrations richly repay reading and meditation on the essence of winter, recognising, as one prayer does, that winter can be a gift to some, a wonder to some and a comfort to some.

***Winters in the world: A journey through the Anglo-Saxon year* by Eleanor Parker**

Yes, I bought this book because of the title! (Also because I have seen from Twitter the author’s interest in the Advent Antiphons.) The book is scholarly, but so well-written that I could understand and learn from her deep knowledge of Anglo-Saxon life and, in particular, poetry. So far I have only read the first quarter, that devoted to Winter, and have been fascinated to see how some of the human responses to harsh weather, to darkness, to the need for festivals to brighten the gloom (and much more) have not changed very much in over 1500 years. I look forward to spending the rest of the year learning more.

***The Light in the Dark: A winter journal* by Horatio Clare**

The author begins by recognising in himself a tendency to fear and shun winter which leads to his decision to keep a winter journal for the months of October to March. The extracts he shares in this book range from mundane, through shocking (the slaughter of a number of his mother’s sheep by dogs during a raid to capture badgers for baiting) to a personal struggle with seasonal depression. He is attentive to the beauty and harshness of the winter weather throughout, but I have to admit I think writing the book was better therapy for him than reading it was for me!

Not winter-related, but part of our sabbatical reading:

***Bringing back the beaver* by Derek Gow**

We have beavers at the edge of the garden here! They arrived this autumn and it has been fascinating to experience them changing the environment before our very eyes! Gow's book shares some of the frustrations in trying to persuade the authorities for the "rightness" of the beaver's return (after 400 years) to Britain. I could hear him sigh through all the blocking and delaying tactics. Come and see the fruit of your labours right here, Derek! Thank you! (Message to me as a Superintendent Minister – beware of a tendency to delay change!)

***Desire, Love* by Andrew Clitherow**

Desire is God-given but needs to be redeemed in order to be loving. I found it helpful to be able to hold this theme and question whether I need to look at what I want to do; let my "desire" be monitored by the power of love. Especially with regard to "life after active ministry in Strathclyde". What will it mean to have my desires in retirement redeemed by God's love.

Another theme which recurred was Clitherow is pointing out that the present emphasis in church preaching on "letting go" may not echo the words of Jesus, "take up your cross", which suggest a serious accepting of our responsibilities in Christian discipleship. Interesting.

***Of stone and sky* by Merryn Glover**

I read *A Scots Quair* (including *Sunset Song*) a number of years ago and felt the echoes of that in this gripping novel set in the sheep farming community of the Cairngorms. We are caught up in the lives of a family, whose story is told with passion and grace through the voices of Mo and Sorley. That passionate and gracious telling of the story drew me in – to laugh and to cry. The disappearance of Mo's best friend and Sorley's brother, Colvin, is the backdrop to the telling of the tale, and artefacts are discovered through the book which tell us something of his final journey into the hills.

The experience of the farming of sheep in these Highland winters is shared – with all its harsh reality of horizontal sleet, destructive gales and bitter temperatures. A warning to me not to romanticise "winter light" from the comfort of our cottage log burner.

The book does not avoid some vivid descriptions of child birth, the pain and shame of adultery, the flight from threatened abuse, the curse of alcoholism. Yet there is goodness. Of course, I want Agnes to be my mother. Of course I want to be a minister like Mo.

We have friends coming to share a few days with us in April – and this is the book we have chosen to send them – so that we might discuss it together. I wonder what it might throw up? It was certainly a memorable experience reading it.

I think what warmed me most about this beautiful book was the gentle, attractive spirituality of Mo, the central character. Her relationship with God is absolutely core to her life, but she is never self-righteous, never 'holier-than-thou', never judgemental, never saccharine. She listens, she loves, she is proactive in other people's lives but without interfering, and she prays. Quietly, privately, in her own space, lit by a candle and inspired by the ancient family bible, she prays for the people she loves. And the God she loves shows her how to love them better.

Andrew and Jill