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Longing for Spring: Songs of Lament

Abstract

"Hope cannot be divorced from lament; our hope for tomorrow has a context in the suffering and sorrow that surround us today."

Posting about songs that encourage us from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

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Longing for Spring: Songs of Lament

John MacInnis

For those fuzzy on the details, Groundhog Day (February 2) is named for the playful North American tradition of observing if a groundhog emerging from its home will see its shadow and draw back (portending six more weeks of winter) or see the sunlight and go forth (heralding an early spring). The day coincides with the longstanding liturgical celebration of Candlemas, which marks the presentation of Jesus at the temple (described in Luke 2); and, for some, including many Christians from Guatemala, it is the conclusion of Christmastide. Not without significance, this day also falls between the winter solstice (considered the beginning of winter) and vernal equinox (the first day of spring). With apologies to Bill Murray, it seems appropriate to consider Groundhog Day as a time of transition, a day to hope and look to the future.

But hope cannot be divorced from lament; our hope for tomorrow has a context in the suffering and sorrow that surround us today. Calvin described this contradiction in his Commentary on Hebrews 11:

Promised to us is eternal life, but it is promised to the dead; we are assured of a happy resurrection, but we are as yet involved in corruption; we are pronounced just, as yet sin dwells in us; we hear that we are happy, but we are as yet in the midst of many miseries; an abundance of all good things is promised to us, but still we often hunger and thirst; God proclaims that he will come quickly, but he seems deaf when we cry to him. What would become of us were we not supported by hope, and did not our minds emerge out of the midst of darkness above the world through the light of God's word and of his Spirit?

Only personal examination will show for sure, but it is possible that the songs we sing and listen to betray a preference for generic hope, assurance of God's favor, and future glory over against a sincere wrestling with specific manifestations of sin and the havoc they wreck in the world. Sometimes God seems silent when our hearts are broken. Sometimes protest and indignation are appropriate. Sometimes we need songs of lament.

The searching and skillful artistry of Sandra McCracken is brought to bear on this need in her new album, “Songs from the Valley.” This collection of seven songs features McCracken’s strong acoustic lead with clean electronic production and added effects.

The album opens with “Fool’s Gold” and McCracken sings “Nobody needs another love song.” Too true. Her chosen imagery is someone who has been taken in by the outward signs of love and who has also, in reality, been fooled. Relationships can go wrong, and things are said and done that are not okay. The fallout of a failed relationship appears also to be the theme of “Reciprocate,” in which McCracken laments the “good mistake” of choosing to love, but not being loved in return.

The chorus to “Oh, Gracious Light” rings like an old-time Gospel song:

“Oh, gracious light, Oh, gracious light,
I have been walking, walking so long, in darkness.”

Here, hope shows up in brokenness, the hope of God’s presence with us in suffering—like light breaking through clouds. The clouds do not completely dissipate, though; God gives strength to “live leaning in when the pain is fierce.”

For “Lover of My Soul,” comfort is taken in the fact that, though forgiveness is hard for us to give when wronged, we remain loved by God, who “always knows what is best for me.” Indeed, God’s love often manifests in the kindness of others. In “Kindness,” McCracken sings about sitting with a friend on a wet “February day” or talking for hours by phone, and, in that friendship, finding herself carried along. “A cord with many strands is not easily broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

Songs from the Valley concludes with “Letting Go.” Like “Parrot in Portugal” which precedes it, the words to “Letting Go” are largely evocative: “Planting rows of sorrow, waiting for the harvest...” Too often, we’re responsible for the rows of sorrow that we painstakingly plant as we nurse grudges and recall past offences. To McCracken’s good counsel, to let these go, one should also point to the example of Christ: self-sacrifice for the good of others—let go of yourself.

Groundhog Day sits between the beginning of winter and the start of spring, and, whether a woodchuck sees his shadow, the deathly chill of cold and snow must give way to warmth and life. McCracken’s songs offer listeners an opportunity to wrestle with sorrow and take hope in their longing for spring.