



The First Snowfall

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Nature bestows many reminders of God's tender mercies. Even snow. It was sometimes difficult for me to appreciate the snow last season when shoveling the more than one hundred inches that landed in our driveway. But far worse are those winters when our cross-country skies hang unused in the garage. And truth be told, I rather like shoveling. There's nothing more invigorating than a cold crisp morning flaunting its dazzling white blanket.

We live in a flood plain on the Grand River north of Grand Rapids. It's a small community of river-rats who are notorious for storing too much junk outside. Snow mercifully covers all the stuff and for a few days we appear as regular folks with tidy yards.

Poets have long liked snow. Robert Frost, America's premier twentieth-century poet, has us "Stopping by the Woods on A Snowy Evening" to "watch the woods fill up with snow." We might stay longer and bask in this blessing, but we "have promises to keep and miles to go before [we] sleep."

One of the greatest nineteenth-century American poets is John Greenleaf Whittier, a Massachusetts Quaker and Abolitionist. "Snowbound" is, for my money, his most memorable poem. How can we not relish the lyrical beauty of those first lines?

*The sun that brief December day
Rose cheerless over hills of gray,
And, darkly circled, gave at noon
A sadder light than waning moon.*

The storm rages on and the family is snowbound but warmed by the hearth and the little things in life that are most appreciated during such times of confinement:

*We sped the time with stories old,
Wrought puzzles out, and riddles told,
Or stammered from our school-book lore
"The Chief of Gambia's golden shore."*

My favorite American snow poem comes

from the pen of James Russell Lowell, the son of a minister. Like Whittier, he was an abolitionist, a lifestyle influenced by his wife who was also a poet. Lowell grieved the deaths not only of his wife but also three of his four children. Indeed, he became so depressed that he contemplated suicide. Yet amid all his pain he was able to recognize God's tender mercies.

"The First Snowfall" is considered by some to be little more than syrupy sentimentality. But it tells a profound story. The stage is set in snowy nineteenth-century New England:

*The snow had begun in the gloaming,
And busily all the night
Had been heaping field and highway
With a silence deep and white.*

The poem paints pictures of "every pine and fir and hemlock" as we listen to "Chanticleer's muffled crow." But the heart of the poem is an indoor scene. "I stood and watched by the window," writes Lowell, as "flurries of snowbirds" whirled by. His mind, however, is elsewhere:

*I thought of a mound in sweet Auburn
Where a little headstone stood;
How the flakes were folding it gently,
As did robins the babes in the wood.*

Then little Mabel interrupts his thoughts and asks, "Father, who makes it snow?" He tells her of the "good All-Father who cares for us here below." But his thoughts are still in sweet Auburn. He bends down to kiss her—she not knowing "that my kiss was given to her sister, folded close under deepening snow." His darling baby Blanche had brightened his life for fifteen months until that dark day in the spring of 1846. The pain is still so very searing as the first snow flakes fall the following winter.

But the snow reminds a grieving father of God's tender mercies. To Mabel he had whispered: "The snow that husheth all, Darling, the merciful Father alone can make it fall." The merciful Father who folds us gently with the snow flakes of his tender mercies. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

The snow reminds a grieving father, of... the merciful Father who folds us gently with the snow flakes of his tender mercies.