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Psalms 51:7 ESV

⁷ *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

Isaiah 1:18 ESV

¹⁸ *“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;*

1 Chronicles 11:22 ESV

²² *And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two heroes of Moab. He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen.*

Isaiah 55:10 ESV

¹⁰ *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

Proverbs 25:13 ESV

¹³ *Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest
is a faithful messenger to those who send him;
he refreshes the soul of his masters.*

Exodus 4:6 ESV

⁶ *Again, the LORD said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow.*

Daniel 7:9 ESV

*⁹ “As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.*

Matthew 28:1–3 ESV

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

Revelation 1:12–14 ESV

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.

Spiritual snow.

I'd like to do something a little different today and just have some fun. It's the third Sunday of Advent. We're getting close to Christmas and people often think about snow at Christmas time. I'm from southern California originally, and so no, I don't wish for white Christmases – but last Christmas Eve I shared a story with you, and I'd like to add something to that story. It has to do with the birth of our

first child, Martina. I was still very much a Californian at the time, and Martina was due to be born in December. We lived in Louisville, which is east of Boulder, and at the time, the hospital in Boulder was all the way across and to the north of Boulder; even in good weather, it was an easy thirty-minute drive. So, I was a little – or rather very – paranoid about the weather being bad when Wendy went into labor. I imagined trying to slug through mountains of snow, wheels spinning, the car bottoming out, with a baby just minutes away. Well, it didn't happen that way. The day Martina was born, the drive was not eventful. There was no snow. Martina was born safely. But I'll get back to this story.

Let's talk about a spiritual issue that I am sure you've been dying to study: the Bible and snow. There wasn't much snow in Jesus' life. True, the mountains around the northern part of the Galilee near the Sea of the Galilee, since they're at an elevation, do get snow occasionally. But the southern Galilee, the coastal plain, and the Jordan Valley are usually subtropical. Maybe every few years, though, Jerusalem will have several inches of snow. So, snow did not significantly impact Israel culturally or agriculturally, with the exception that melting snow from Mount Hermon was an important source of water for both the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. We have nine brief readings today, and except for the fact that a couple of these little stories are repeated more than once in the Bible,

these are the only references to snow I could find - that is, with the exception of one, which I am going to hold back on until later in this sermon. But do keep in mind that I am certainly a well-known expert on snow and the Bible. I should note that biblical scholars claim that snow is mentioned twenty-three times in the Bible, although I would be very hard-pressed to find that many references.

So, just for fun, let's run through these passages. In Psalm 51, snow is compared to both physical and spiritual cleanliness. Isaiah 1 makes it clear that when we are forgiven, our souls are as white as snow – another positive snow metaphor. In 1st Chronicles, we're told the valor of an act of killing two enemies of Israel is heightened by comparing it to killing a lion in a pit – when the pit is full of snow. I guess that makes it harder. In Isaiah 55, we are reminded, that indeed, even the people of ancient pre-Israel knew that snow was what provided the river water that kept their crops alive and thereby allowed them to eat. Proverb 25 is a particularly intriguing reference; it turns out that snow and ice were sometimes imported from the highlands to provide a source of cold water in the summer, something that really only the wealthy could afford. Snow is used a symbol of spiritual, and not just physical, rejuvenation. In Exodus, Moses is punished for badmouthing the Israelites; he says that they will never trust God. It turns out that in the Bible, leprosy was considered a punishment for slander. Snow is used

as a way of describing the pale whiteness of skin on a person with leprosy, and so Moses' skin turns as white as snow. In Daniel 7, the prophet Daniel is having a wild and crazy vision where he sees someone; the whiteness of that person's clothes is like snow, and this tells us that this person is God. Similarly, in Matthew 28, the clothes of the risen Jesus are brilliantly white – as white as snow. In Revelation, someone has hair that is so white, it is compared to snow; this person is Jesus, and again, snow is a sign of purity and godliness.

In sum, in the Bible, snow is used very sparingly, but it is used to connote purity and godliness and forgiveness. It is used to refer to the source of life and food, as well as comfort and coolness. But it is used in a negative way once that I could find, in that it describes the skin of a person with leprosy. But since having a disease is not shameful, maybe this is really just a neutral reference.

Back to Martina. As it turned out, there was no hurry getting to the hospital anyway, as Wendy was in labor for many hours. Eventually, Martina was born, but only after she developed some irregularities with her heartbeat, making the medical folks think she might be in trouble. So, they did a very fast, but not quite emergency, cesarean. I watched it happen. Martina was weak when she was born, and her blood sugar was extremely low, and her body temperature was low. So, right after she was born, a nurse handed Martina to me and gave the

order: “follow me”. I ran after the nurse, down the hall to the pediatric unit, where they had me stand under an extremely hot lamp with her in my arms while I fed Martina sugar water out of a bottle. After a bit, I started smelling something burning and discovered that it was my hair melting.

To be honest, it was great that they involved me so closely in her birth and in taking care of her in the hours after she was born. She was my first child and only the second baby I had ever held. It caused this extremely inexperienced dad to bond quickly with his daughter. Wendy was okay, Martina was in great shape within a few hours, and I have extremely positive memories of the whole thing.

But back to this issue of snow. Because of the many-hour labor and the fact that I stayed in the hospital to personally care for Martina during her first day of life, over two days passed before I left the hospital. When I left, it was afternoon, with the sun behind thick clouds. I was wearing cotton pants, running shoes, and a tee shirt. A severe cold front had moved in. It was freezing and my car was buried. But the sight of that snow wasn't scary or annoying. It was amazing. I stood in front of the emergency entrance to the old Boulder Community Hospital in north Boulder, staring at the drifts of snow. I remember the sun breaking through the clouds and the snow suddenly sparkling in the late sunshine. I was a kid from L.A. – and snow could never have looked more

beautiful. I was extremely cold, but I felt perfect. As it turned out, another new dad helped me dig my car out. I was on my cold and wet way in about an hour.

It's not the scare we had with a long labor followed by Martina being in trouble, it's not my fear I had had in advance of having to drive to the hospital in the snow, it's not digging myself out while shivering, these are not the things I think about when I see snow. To this day, I'm in awe of snow. Yes, when I think about the birth of our first child, what I think about is that snow I told you about last Christmas – but do I think oh, why didn't I bring a coat? No. I don't even think hell, I don't care I had to dig my car out while I was underdressed and shaking from the cold - because my kid was born. Those aren't my thoughts. I see God when I see snow.

There's one other snow quote that I found that I'd like to share with you. It's from Job, chapter 9, verse 30: *If I wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into a pit.* Remember that Job is a wealthy man with a huge family, a big estate, and extensive livestock. He is blameless and upright. He serves as a priest for his family. Just in case any of his ten kids sinned, he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them every single morning – something that Wendy and I do. But then Satan argues to God that Job is a good man only because God has blessed him so much. God then allows Satan to test

Job – and then bad things begin to happen. The Job story is a story of innocent suffering, something we see a lot of in our world today, and something that was common in Near Eastern stories of biblical times, and these are stories that spanned many religions of the day. Job gets robbed and loses his animals and servants. Fire falls from the sky, torching his property. An enemy army attacks and kills more of his people and animals. A mighty wind comes along and blows his house away, killing all of his children. Job suffers mightily, but his response is that he came into the world naked, and that he will leave naked, and that the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. He blesses the Lord to the end. Job then gets infected with a flesh-eating disease. His wife wants him to curse God, but he says no. Job decides that he must talk to God personally. God reminds Job that he, God, has all power over creation, and that he, God, is wise and knows what he is doing. Job agrees. God blesses Job.

In our passage, what Job is saying is that even if he purifies himself as much as possible, even if he proves his innocence as much as possible, God is still going to let tremendous challenges be thrown at him. In the end, Job survives, proves his faith, and ends up richer than ever: 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, and 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. Not male donkeys, mind you, but female ones. This is more than I have ever owned, and in fact, Wendy and I have

never owned a single camel, let alone a full yoke of oxen, whatever a yoke is. Job and his wife even have another ten children. That's twenty total kids that his wife bore, if you're keeping count. But the point here is that snow is used to illustrate the most intense form of cleanliness in the Job story. Again, snow is used as a metaphor for spiritual purity and deep faith. Given my experience with Martina and snow, I would have to agree.

Snow: the Hebrew word in the Bible is *sheleg*, by the way. For me, when I come across snow in the Bible, or for that matter, snow in the real world, it represents God's incredible grace. Snow, for me, isn't just a beautiful literary symbol in the Bible. Snow was a blazing symbol from God for me in my personal life. Our God is always there for us, always blessing us, even if we don't know it, even if we don't care. God keeps us clean spiritually, and often does it in surprising ways. Think of that the next time you see snow. Amen.