

Checking (and rechecking) the weather

When we're obsessed with the forecast, we may miss what's happening in the present.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



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A trend has emerged in recent years at the church I serve in eastern Iowa. When local meteorologists predict a major weather event is on the horizon—severe thunderstorm, bitter cold front, blizzard snow conditions—phone calls start coming in from area congregations wondering if we will be canceling our services. Twenty-five years ago these calls never occurred. Today they're commonplace, as pastors and church leaders try to decide whether to cancel their own services. What's changed?

I think one thing is that we've become increasingly obsessed with the weather, a nation of pathological weather worriers. People expend significant emotional and mental energy trying to decide if they should stay home or have that picnic, buy a snow shovel or stock up on food, enjoy worship or watch the Weather Channel.

Meteorologists have become demigods in much of the public's imagination. Their every word is trusted—even if, by definition, those words constitute only a prediction. We wrap our lives and decisions around them anyway. The worse a potential storm can be made to sound, the more we seem to soak it up as crucial to our self-understanding.

Now, severe weather that truly endangers human life deserves urgent news coverage. Hurricane, tornado, and flash flood warnings are no joke. With climate change, extreme weather is growing more common, and its effect on vulnerable populations is serious business. But for most of us on most days, it would be refreshing if we could be a little less afraid of ordinary weather patterns that show up on the radar, saving our anxiety for truly dangerous weather events.

Local weather coverage, which in many media markets now consumes more than 30 percent of the morning and evening news, seems designed to make us more afraid. Who needs horror movies when listening to a forecast will suffice? Meteorologists open local news with "first alert" forecasts. "Breaking news" from the weather desk lets viewers know that lightning was spotted in a neighboring county. Anchors speak of tracking storms as if they're hunting down a criminal. The existence of "storm teams" makes it clear that a whole group of trained forecasters is required to share the gravity of weather data.

Although the Bible doesn't have a word for weather, it contains plenty of references to weather phenomena. Jesus chides a crowd of people one day for their attention to weather patterns: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:54-56). That's Jesus reprimanding weather-smart people for their lack of attention to more important things God is doing right in their midst.

This past Christmas, our congregation welcomed to its services guests from three area churches that had canceled their Christmas worship. The streets were clear of ice and snow. The closures were prompted by forecasters warning of dangerous cold—or rather, by anxious people accustomed to treating every last meteorological decree as sacred. The temperature dipped to 5 degrees that night, hardly atypical in our region.

We love to check and recheck the weather. Maybe it helps us feel like we're making the world a safer place. Or perhaps we're secretly longing to become meteorologists with a gift for banter. Let's just hope it's not because weather is the most interesting thing happening in our lives.