

Lessons from the land of lake effect snow

Life can be as unpredictable as the weather in upstate New York. But God's steadfast love endures forever.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Martha Park)

Three little words, “lake effect snow,” still evoke fear and trembling in me. Until I moved to Ithaca, New York, for graduate school, I had never heard the phrase. The individual words sound relatively benign. A lake is a beautiful body of water, certainly in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. And snow is perfect weather in the winter, conjuring up images of fireplaces and cozy nights at home. But lake effect snow means cooler atmospheric conditions and cold air masses. It means that the five or six months between Halloween and Easter can involve an awe-inspiring amount of precipitation. Kids might go trick-or-treating in their cute costumes, or they might cover them up with down parkas, woolen mittens, and snow boots. Easter Sunday can mean a new dress and peep toe heels or knee-high boots and a long woolen coat. You never know how the winter season will begin or end.

I found the winter in upstate New York to be absolutely gorgeous, when it wasn't absolutely inconvenient. I had to weigh the flight cancellations and dangerous roads alongside the crisp, clean air and the downhill sledding. I do have to give credit to lake effect snow for me finally finishing my dissertation. One Mother's Day, while walking from my apartment to campus, I saw a few snow flurries in the still-frigid air. I was shocked: snow on Easter was possible, but in May? That just seemed cruel to a poor, overworked graduate student who longed for sun and warmth. I vowed then and there that it was time to finish my work and seek warmer horizons.

Twenty years removed from that late spring snowfall—which prompted my expeditious sprint of edits, revisions, and eventual dissertation defense—I realize that the land of lake effect snow was responsible for some of the most transformative years of my life. The realities of both graduate school and the winter weather forced me to slow down, read deeply, and savor the precious time of studying as my primary responsibility. Winter was not a dormant season but one of healing and recovery under a blanket of snow. Likewise, I was growing, learning, and being transformed during these years.

I learned to respect the utter unpredictability of when winter would end. I gained a deep appreciation for the first appearance of crocuses and snowdrops. I also learned that more snow was always possible, covering even the beautiful fields of red tulips on campus. These years helped me to distill an important truth to its very essence: the unpredictability of life is bearable because we serve a sure, steady, and certain God.

I love the repetition, in each of the 26 verses of Psalm 136, that God's "steadfast love endures forever." The psalmist echoes this powerful refrain while describing all the ways that God shows up for God's people: leading them out of the wilderness, delivering them from dangers seen and unseen. The circumstances of our lives, like the weather, seem wildly unpredictable. We may experience both poverty and wealth within a lifetime. We may go from the heights of love to the devastation of heartbreak within a season. The joy of a new baby and an enlarged family may coincide with grief at the loss of a parent or friend.

The utter unpredictability of life can cause spiritual whiplash, where we want to rail against God in anger at one moment and fall to our knees in profound gratitude at the next. And yet God's steadfast love, which endures forever, remains certain and never-failing. Our circumstances and our lives may vacillate in the extreme, but God keeps loving us through all of it.

When we walk away from people or institutions that harm us, there God is, loving us. When we are angry at our circumstances and the unfairness of it all, there God is, loving us. When we decide to leave the church and organized religion behind, when we sit in seasons of unbelief and anger at God's silence, when we finally surrender to the mystery of it all and accept that some things will never make sense in this lifetime—there God is, loving us.

I am humbled by this God who loves me with such a steadfast love, who doesn't discard me or turn away from me even as I struggle to believe and obey. I am humbled by this God who loves me through my temperamental nature, my shifts in mood, my highs and lows. I am humbled by this God who loves me even as I keep trying to figure out how to authentically love my neighbor and myself, when there are many days I don't even like myself or my neighbors very much.

It was a rare low-pressure system, bringing cold air from the north, that turned what otherwise would have been a May rainfall into a wet snow. Weather is unpredictable that way. I learned to keep snow gear handy, both at home and in the car. And I learned to cherish the spring and summer seasons when they finally arrived, to truly appreciate the beauty made possible by the unpredictability of lake effect snow.

May we likewise learn to cherish the faithfulness of God in our most unpredictable life seasons. To rest in the steadfast and perfect love of God, who doesn't change—who doesn't fall in and out love with us on a whim, who doesn't forsake us

even when we are unfaithful. And may we rejoice in this great hope: the unpredictability of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword can never separate us from the steadfast love of God, which endures forever.

This is my last piece as a regular *Century* columnist. It has been a distinct honor to write as part of the Voices section.