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Pastoral Nature Notes
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Winter's Tracks

The early days of winter are marked by occasional snow flurries- which as the ground cools will begin to accumulate and sporadically frost the landscape. Colder areas are coated more densely than warm areas. These frosted spots with the passage of time tell stories of creatures of the wood.

I encountered one of these such spots recently. A small frozen creek between a willow bog and a grassy marsh. The soil and vegetation around the creek held very little of nature's natural icing. However, the frozen creek had an even gentle, white, coat. This pure coat told a story. It was a story of creatures moving about and the difficulties they did or did not encounter.

There were tracks on the snow-covered ice. I first noticed that a deer had walked downstream on the creek. The deer's tracks were paralleled by fox tracks going up stream. Both presumably looking for a break from walking the rough, frozen, grass tangled, land nearby. As I studied these tracks, I noticed in the deer tracks some peculiar features. Near where the tracks entered the ice, there was a track that was not the regular cloven hoof print but rather what looked like a series of five or six diagonally drawn oval shapes. What could this mean? Was this the mark of a slick gelatinous hoof that had stuttered across the glassy ice? Was this a deer who attempted to break the ice? Was this deer thirsting for a cool drink? Only to be disappointed by the stuttering response given to the hoof by the ice? As I continued to examine the cloven tracks, they made their way down stream with their upside-down heart shapes and again there appeared yet another hoof stutter. However, this one was lengthier than the first one. Did the friction of the frost covered ice give out? Did this thirsting deer now slip? Possibly. These tracks of this quiet creature then disappeared into the grass of the marsh below.

It was in this area that the fox tracks began. His four padded, four toed tracks didn't even erase the snow from the ice he simply pressed it down leaving his tracks. He apparently went from the grassy marsh to the willow bog without incident. Simply leaving his soft tracks without loss of footing or evidence of any struggle.

Many of us are familiar with the piece "*Footprints in the Sand*" The main point being that when the author was going through the most difficult times of his life there was only one set of tracks. When he questions God about why God was not with him God replies, "It was then that I carried you."

Tracks can tell so much more than when God carried us. In looking back our life or the lives of others they reveal much. They can tell us which way we were going. They can tell us what we were looking for. Did we find what we were after, or where we disappointed just as the deer looking for water met with ice on stuttering hoof? Only then to move on and slip on the ice. This can be very much like our relationship with God. We seek him and even thirst for him as Psalm 42 says, "As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?" Yet at times we run into hard ice an almost hard absence of God like Jesus experienced on the cross when he utters the words of Psalm 22, "My God my God why have you forsaken me." In uttering those words, he continues on even to his death. Just as the deer continued on.

Other times in life looking back on our tracks they are like that of the foxes' tracks. The Lord seems so near (like on Christmas) and treading the slippery surface of temptation we traverse not paying any attention but then pass over it simply leaving our tracks. We went through it but without difficulty. For this was not the time for us to be challenged or disappointed but a time to experience the quiet victory of Lord in our lives of just passing over without slipping or dashing our foot (Psalm 91) except in this case as on ice.

The deer nor the fox tracks are better than the other they simply are. One had more difficulty at this short glimpse of life another more ease. Yet both made it to where they were going. If we examine our lives, I am sure we would find combinations of both fox and deer tracks on the flurry frosted ice of our life. It is not important whether we were successful or not but that we kept going. Just as the deer and the fox did. The journey is as important as the destination. It is just as important to recognize that because our tracks reveal slips and disappointments, it doesn't make us less valuable, it just means we slipped or that our expectations weren't met. Winter tracks give us a look into what happened on the journey to a destination. For us, our destination is not merely the cover of a willow bog or the warmth of a grassy marsh but the fulfillment of the waters of the heavenly stream Ezekiel 47 which do not freeze but nourish in the season of eternity.