

Your Basic, Generic January Sermon

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The very first thing that must be said about January is this: January is long, thirty-one days long. Beginning with a burst of revelry confined to the first few hours of the month, January quickly settles down into the quiet of entire communities of people trying to sleep off the effects of seasonal celebrations, the quiet of women and men solemnly promising themselves never again to repeat the excesses of the past, never to make the old mistakes again, to turn over a new leaf and start anew. And then, through thirty-one long dreary days, January goes nowhere--except to February.

When I think of January, my mind goes back almost half a century to those far-off days when I was in elementary school. On the day after the Christmas recess had ended, on that day in January when we returned to school for the first time after the holiday, it was obvious that we were facing a new era. During the holiday period, the elves had visited the classroom. The bulletin boards were dramatically altered. Where, only a few days before, a great star had streamed its golden rays across a sky of dark blue construction paper, where only a few days before, a team of reindeer pulled a tiny sleigh across the same dark blue construction paper, where only a few days before a nativity scene had decorated a lower corner of the bulletin board, now the board was bare, stripped to its surface, waiting--for what? The black boards lining the front of the room had been carefully washed and cleaned and presented us with a blank surface waiting--for what? The old wooden floors that had been worn by so many generations of children's feet had been swept clean and newly oiled. The wastebaskets were empty--not a scrap of paper left; not a shaving left in the pencil sharpener. The desks were arranged carefully in rows, with a precision reminiscent of a military drill-team. Even the window-blinds--those curious window blinds which pulled up and down from the center of the window to shade us from the slanting rays of the afternoon sun--even the blinds had been carefully drawn so that they all were at the same precise level across the window wall. The room was in order, perfect, stern, uncompromising, unrelenting order.

As I entered the room that morning, my heart sank. Here was a visual representation of January. The room exuded an atmosphere of seriousness. All the lightness, all the jocularity, all the joyful anticipation of the autumn was over. Now we would be getting down to business. We would begin with a review, to determine just how much we had actually learned in the lenient months between September and December. Then we would make plans to correct the deficiencies and build on our strengths. Now was a time for work. Those bulletin boards would soon be covered with papers--essays, math papers, art projects, the results of hours of unremitting labor. And what was worse, we knew that there would be no respite, no great holiday to look forward to. Oh to be sure, in the February they would haul out the red hearts and sprinkle them around the bulletin boards,

and up would go stern pictures of Lincoln and Washington looking at each other across our posted papers and drawings. And in March the hearts would be replaced by green shamrocks. In April, where Lincoln and Washington had been pinned, robin red-breasts would be pulling on reluctant worms. But there was no great holiday to anticipate. From January on there was only the long, long run into spring, and the distant hope that we would somehow endure to the end of the school year and the beginning of summer holidays.

That early encounter with January has remained with me throughout all my years. When I return to the pulpit the first Sunday after the holiday season, I find myself recalling the smell of a class-room, where the floor has recently been oiled and the blackboards scrubbed and everything readied for the real work of the world. In January there is no longer the excuse that we should delay our plans or defer our projects because people are just getting back into their routines after the summer, or are too busy with the upcoming holidays to be able to participate. January, long, unforgiving January provides no excuses, no respite. Now, if ever, the work of the church will be done. Now, if ever, we will get down to the real business of life. January is long, unremitting, and leads only to February.

January, you know, was named by the Romans for their god Janus. Janus was the patron of doorways and gateways and new beginnings. He was depicted with one head adorned with two faces, one looking back over the past; the other looking forward toward the future. And that is the nature of January in our culture: a time for looking back over the past and forward toward the future. Like those elementary-school students, we use January as a time to assess what we have accomplished, what we have learned, to define our deficiencies, and sometimes we even resolve to remedy those deficiencies. It is a time for year-end reviews and for promises and resolutions.

Standing at the beginning of a new year, and look backward and forward simultaneously, like old Janus, I find that I am profoundly troubled by the baggage we carry with us into the new year, and yet I find some reason for mild optimism in curious and unexpected places. To begin with, 1992 has left us with a great many unresolved and profoundly challenging problems. As one year ended and a new year began, I heard this statistic: There are, in the world at this moment, over 700,000,000 people who are literally starving to death. And a large number of these starving people are small children, too weak to cry, far beyond any rescue we might mount. In addition, there are in the world another 1 billion people who are so profoundly malnourished that their physical, emotional, mental development will be seriously impaired and many of them will die prematurely. A large number of these malnourished people are small children. In the United States of America, still the richest society the world has ever known, the number of hungry people has increased since 1985 from 20 to 30 million--a large number of them children.

As one year ended and a new year began, the world was profoundly troubled by the re-emergence of ancient ethnic hatreds and rivalries. Czechoslovakia has split into two rival ethnic states. In what used to be Yugoslavia, Serbs and Croats, Christians and Moslems

are engaged in a brutal civil war, with reports of murder and rape, of concentration camps, and efforts at ethnic cleansing campaigns, of mind-boggling violence and destruction. At the same time, across what used to be the Soviet Union come echoes of other equally ancient rivalries which have not been overcome and which still threaten the peace of that vast area. In Germany, skin heads and neo-nazis, and ordinary people who feel insecure and uncertain in a rapidly changing world are taking out their frustrations on those who are identified as strangers, aliens, foreigners. And in the United States, so-called bias related incidents--a curiously anemic term for acts of racism and hatred--seem to be on the rise, and the tensions between ethnic communities seem to be growing again. We watch and those of us who are old enough remember when similar ethnic hatreds consumed an entire nation, an ancient and cultured mid-European people, in madness and murder and ended by plunging the entire world into a great war, the consequences of which still shape our lives. We tell ourselves that it is not the same this time, and it probably isn't, but we cannot escape the sense that the fundamental flaw which made a racist state possible sixty years ago has not been mended, that those irrational hatreds have not been resolved and so they continue to work their way in blood among us.

As one year ended and a new year began, the reports continued to come in concerning the ability of the planet to support the human venture, and those reports are grim, indeed. While there is still debate over the seriousness of the threat of global warming, there seems little doubt that we continue to affect the planet's climate in dangerous ways. The major debate seems to focus around a question of whether we are responsible for the warming of the planet, or whether, by our activity we are simply exacerbating and making worse a natural cycle and whether the result of our activity will be increasingly profound problems for the human venture, or total catastrophe. There seems to be no doubt that the degradation of the ozone layer is the consequence of human activity, or that it is progressing more rapidly than we had allowed ourselves to believe, the thinning now measurable over North America. In the meantime, we continue to level ancient stands of forest, exposing fragile and vulnerable soils to erosion, the desertification of the planet continues apace, and day by day entire species are disappearing, the consequence of what some scientists insist is an unprecedented die-off of species over such a short period of time. And behind all these statistics and all the computer models is the persistent, whispered question, "How long will Gaia, the Great Mother, tolerate our foolish misuse of her resources. When will it be our turn to follow in the path of the dodo, the passenger pigeon, the dinosaur, all those creatures who once called earth home, and who are no longer to be found among the species which inhabit this gracious, living planet."

As one year ended and a new year began, it was increasingly obvious that the human race was responding to these profound challenges by attempting to breathe new life into ancient and dangerously destructive answers. From here to the middle east and on into Asia, frightened, distraught, frustrated men and women are attempting to re-establish religious fundamentalisms of all kinds, to confront the future by a return to the past--to a past that never truly existed. In India, Hindu fundamentalists and Moslem fundamentalists murder each other over the siting of a temple or a mosque. From Iran to Africa the call is heard to re-organize human culture on the basis of the Koran and to

establish fundamentalist Moslem Governments which will over throw the liberal dream of a world in which people enjoy basic, inalienable rights, regardless of gender, affectional preference, race or religion. In the United States of America, the call has gone out for a religious and cultural war against the modernism of our times, and in local elections all across the nation, people who are committed to re-establishing a past that never was, to making this a Christian nation and a theocratic state, have been elected to school boards, to city councils, to state legislatures, and to controlling positions in political parties. And in places as diverse as Colorado and Manhattan, the struggle is on to deny people respect and fundamental rights because of their affectional preferences.

But these are not the only fundamentalisms abroad in the land. In the United States, we have chosen to interpret the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire as a vindication of our economic system--the free market system based upon a drive for ever increasing exploitation, production and consumption. Faced with the evidence that the economic order which has blessed us so profoundly has done so at an enormous cost--to the planet, to indigenous peoples all around the globe, and to our own souls--the official faith, the state religion of the United States has responded by an insistence that we redouble our efforts, that we spread the "free market system" across the planet regardless of the cost. That, too, is a fundamentalism which seeks to confront the future by a return to the past, and refuses to entertain the possibility that the gospel it preaches may no longer be relevant to the world in which we must live.

Standing at this juncture between the past and the future, examining the baggage we have packed along with us into 1993, there is much to give us pause, much to discourage us and add to the post-holiday depression which is part of finding ourselves in January. But this is not all of the picture. The fact is that 700,000,000 people are starving even as we speak, and another 1 billion are malnourished. But it is also true that most of this disaster is a consequence of our own actions, our own behavior. Despite our depredations of this generous planet, there is still sufficient food produced by this planet each year to feed all the human community. People starve and are malnourished in this country and around the world because of the way we organize human society, because of wars and conflicts and inept organization and inhumane social and economic systems, because of greed and fear and hatred. And those are things we can change. Those are realities which confront us at every level of our daily lives, realities which are responsive to our decisions. And there is some evidence that we are groping our way to new responses. Despite the Gilbert and Sullivan aspects of the deployment of troops to Somalia, this effort to restore order and create an atmosphere in which the starving may be fed may indicate that we have begun to consider using our vast power in more creative and humane ways. It is too soon to know just how it will all come out and whether this signals a new beginning or one more well-intentioned effort which will be captured by the forces of regression, but the possibility remains that the global community is beginning to understand that the welfare of people is a matter of concern for all of us, and that not even national sovereignty can be permitted to stand in the way of responding to human need.

By the same token, the emergence of racial and ethnic hatreds in middle Europe and in the Balkans has been seen for what it is. The people of Germany, haunted by their own

past, have risen in horror at the revival of racism, and have begun to demand that the government act to end the violence and bloodshed. The nations of the world have not been able to devise an effective response to the carnage in Bosnia, but there is a clear consensus that this is not an isolated tragedy, that in some degree all of us are engaged in that horror, and the concentration camps, the programs of ethnic cleansing, the ancient hatreds which result in rape, pillage and murder challenge us all. It is too early to know what the consequences of this tragedy will be, but the sense of corporate responsibility, the sense that the nations of the world have some obligation may indicate a new sense of the unity of the human venture, out of which a new globalism may emerge.

Even in our response to the planet, our home and mother, there is modest reason to be hopeful. I sense a growing understanding that our future well-being is rooted in the well-being of the entire planetary system, that unless we can live within the natural constraints of a finite planet, we cannot survive, and that the need to live within those natural constraints will require of us that we change old and established patterns. Whether we can change quickly enough and completely enough no one knows. The odds are not with us. But we enter a new year with a few hopeful indicators. Over and over again, in this richest of all nations, founded on a ethic of exploitation and consumption, public opinion polls have revealed a willingness to be taxed, to pay more, to sacrifice some immediate benefits to preserve and enhance the environment. Last fall, the effort to deride one candidate for the vice presidency as a radical because of his identification with concern for the environment seemed to backfire. And, in towns all over the nation, people are reporting the anecdotal evidence that goals for recycling of trash are being exceeded, even where recycling is not convenient. Of course, none of this is sufficient, but it may be indicative of a change in attitude which is necessary if we are to undertake the changes demanded by the environmental crises we face.

And in a curious way, the rise of militant fundamentalism--frightening as it often is--may be, in itself, an indicator of the profound change which we are beginning to embrace. In his book, *A WORLD LIT ONLY BY FIRE*, William Manchester, referring to people in another time of enormous danger, of profound challenge, of systemic change, has this to say:

The popes, emperors, cardinals, kings, prelates, and nobles of the time sorted through the snarl and, being typical men in power, chose to believe what they wanted to believe, accepting whatever justified their policies and convictions and ignoring the rest. Even the wisest of them were at a hopeless disadvantage, for their only guide in sorting it all out--the only guide anyone ever has--was the past, and precedents are worse than useless when facing something entirely new.

In a curious way, the rise of fundamentalism in our era may be but an indicator of an inchoate and subconscious recognition of the enormity of the problems we confront, and vast opportunities we confront, and the enormity of the changes we are undergoing. Attempting to deal with this growing reality, many in our time are using the only tools they know--the past imperfectly remembered. The result is an effort at religious, political, economic fundamentalism. It is an effort which cannot succeed, but which can wreak

much havoc and suffering in its long failure. There is some small evidence that the fundamentalist option is of limited appeal. While it has secured electoral victories at local levels in this country, the effort to use conservative and fundamentalist churches as a power base to make a difference in the presidential and congressional races last fall seems to have failed. What is more, the attempt by some politicians to mount a cultural and religious crusade as part of the election campaign seems to have back-fired. We enter the new year with much confusion about the future which lies before us, and not quite certain which lessons from the past are relevant and which are dangerously irrelevant, but there is a sense abroad in the land that the future is not necessarily to be feared, and that the time has come to embrace the unknown and explore whether there be not new answers to the old questions with which we wrestle. That is a good sign as we begin a new year.

On that first school day after the holiday recess, the classroom was organized for the real work of the school year. There would be no excuses. There would be a realistic assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, and a serious attempt to build on the one and redress the other. Through the long month of January, and on into February and from that point on, the work of the school room would progress. And in the end we would be changed. So it is in the world of our daily living. In some ways, we are destined to live our lives in a perpetual January--a post holiday time when we must confront the realities of our strengths and weaknesses, when we must confront unfamiliar dangers and unexpected opportunities, and attempt to build out of them something that has never been before--a world of peace and justice and mercy, a world of reasonable limits, in which all the children of the earth may live and prosper.

It was the late Howard Thurman who best expressed the challenge of January, all the long days of January, the challenge of living in a world of endless January. Thurman wrote:

When the song of the angel is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among us
To make music in the heart.