



“... And the World is About to Turn”

-Joy Barnitz



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In the United States, we celebrate the “new year” on January 1st of each year. This arbitrary date has enormous practical significance in planning our daily lives. It also marks the time when we put away the Christmas gifts, take down decorations and decide what to do with the leftovers. In our daily lives, January 1st is New Year’s Day. But there are other “new years.” Our Christian church year begins with Advent, usually around the first of December. Jews celebrate Rosh Hashanah in September-October whereas the Chinese Lunar New Year is celebrated in January-February. Cycles of life, of seasonal work are familiar to us and we choose to mark one cycle of earth’s revolution around the sun as a way to acknowledge the passage of time.

As we come to the end of each calendar year the internet provides a burst of information about new year’s resolutions: what they should be, how to keep them, etc. Two that caught my attention are both from the *New York Times*:

The first was “How to Make (and keep) a New Year’s Resolution”¹ - which suggests that you “... set a goal that’s doable - and meaningful too.” There’s even a how-to guide on planning, overcoming hurdles, find a community and what to do if you miss your goal (which happens for a lot of the resolutions people make). The article recommends making the goal Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound; SMART for short. As a consulting program manager this sounds way too much like work to me! My head started aching as I thought of having to create a schedule (and maybe a budget!) for my goals, tracking and applying monthly metrics ... I ended up needing a nap and never finished the article.!

I had better success with the second, “The Only Way to Keep Your Resolutions.”² in which the author cites research that “shows that willpower ... wanes over time. ... Worse, exerting willpower can take a psychological and physical toll.” What to do instead? The author cites research that shows that feeling gratitude, compassion and authentic pride in an ability or skill heals us; these feelings slow heart rate, lower blood pressure and reduce anxiety and depression. He calls these: social, moral values. Focusing on these feelings increases staying power, willpower; the people who do this are happier and more satisfied.

Perhaps a simple way to sum this up is: willpower is increased when we focus on others, when we are part of community it’s easier to “hang in there” on tough goals, during tough times. So being part of this church community means that you are already ahead on keeping any resolutions you make!

Our daily lives run on linear time, sequential time (*chronos*). There is another kind of time, sometimes called God’s time (*kairos*), something occurs when it is “proper” or that all things are ready

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/resolution-ideas> (accessed on 30 December 2017)

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/29/opinion/sunday/the-only-way-to-keep-your-resolutions.html> (accessed on 30 December 2017)

for it to occur. This is the time we experience when we are walking the path of regeneration through reflection, repentance (turning again, changing our minds), reformation and renewal of our relationship with God. The earth turns on its axis daily, it circles the sun annually, however our individual world can turn at anytime. Not only when “something” happens to us externally (like a job change, gaining a new family member) but also internally when we turn again to God.

The title for this sermon is taken from the chorus of *Canticle of the Turning* by Rory Cooney. The words are based on Mary’s song, called The Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-56), which she sings upon meeting her cousin Elizabeth and they share the good news of their pregnancies – gifts of the Holy Spirit. The chorus of the song is:

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring,
Let the fire of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn!” *

The third line echoes lines found in the twenty-fifth chapter of *Isaiah*: “Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,” and in the twenty-first chapter of the *Revelation to John*: “... and God himself will be with them, he will wipe every tear from their eyes.” * Prophecies of heaven on earth: no crying, no tears for the former things have passed away.

Today’s Gospel reading highlights an event for which there is no support in Jewish law of this time: presentation of an infant in the Temple following purification. As noted in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, there were no purification rites required for fathers or infants in Jewish law, those prescribed for mothers occur forty days following the birth of a son. Further, “presenting children at the Temple (was) not a recognized custom.”³ We find ourselves forgiving Luke, who was not a Jew, for not knowing Jewish law and custom. Why then is this event included? Perhaps it is to emphasize Jesus’ special status, to highlight the miracle of Jesus’ birth while emphasizing that his parents are adhering to custom. Jesus is Mary and Joseph’s son and they are treating him as a firstborn son is to be treated according to the tradition as Luke describes it.

Or perhaps this story is included so that we may imagine ourselves waiting as Simeon and Anna had been waiting. Simeon was promised that he would see the Messiah before he died and he proclaims his joy at the fulfillment of this revelation; now he can “depart in peace.” How frequently we use these words to describe our feelings of a task fulfilled! Our reading states that Mary and Joseph “were amazed at what was being said about him;” it would be pretty surprising to find a stranger rejoicing over their child! How did Simeon know all these things about Jesus? And Anna, a widow

³ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 102, footnote to Luke 2:22.

and a prophet – one of the very few female prophets in the Bible, whose words are not preserved yet we know from the text that her proclamation is similar to Simeon’s. How strange this must have seemed to Mary and to Joseph; they are beginning to get an idea of just how momentous their son’s life will be. Their world was about to turn, just as the wider world would turn.

Some historians propose that Christianity is going through another great “turning;” the last was the Protestant Reformation which is anchored in Luther’s nailing his “95 Theses” on the Wittenberg Castle church door 500 years ago in 1517.⁴ Diana Butler Bass, a noted church historian, writes:

“[...] the United States (and not only the United States) is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being ... ‘born again.’ ... This transformation is what some hope will be a ‘Great Turning’ toward a global community based on a shared connection, dedicated to justice and equality, that seeks to raise hundreds of millions from poverty, violence and oppression ... Exponential change creates exponential fear along with exponential hope ... Exponential change ends those things that people once assumed and trusted to be true.

At the same time, upheaval opens new pathways to the future. Change is about endings and beginnings and the necessary interrelationship between the two.”⁵

Into these times of darkness, Christ came, Christ comes and Christ will continue to come to each of us, forever. Jesus was “born to be our friend;” the Christ was the “light of the world” which could not be overcome. In a sermon preached here during Advent you heard:⁶

“Christmas is about God’s desire for the well-being not merely of individual human souls, but with the well-being of humanity itself. ... Each one of us is called to live in the light, to use our giftedness and skills, our passion for those (good) things we really care about, so that we may make way for the Christ.”

In the faith tradition of my formation (Swedenborgianism), I was taught that without God’s perpetual presence with each individual human, we could not exist. God’s love is constantly flowing into us like the air we breathe. God’s presence gives us life in our body and mind and also the faculties of reason and reflection that are essential to the ability to become spiritual. The world has many loving people who are living light-filled, useful lives to the best of their ability to do so. Such people trust in

⁴ Source <http://www.history.com/topics/martin-luther-and-the-95-theses> (accessed 15 January 2018)

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. (New York, NY: HarperOne: 2013) 5-6

⁶ Reverend Jeffrey Cheifetz, “Coming to the Light” preached at Covenant Presbyterian Church, San Francisco on 17 December 2017.

God and let their inner light blossom into hope: an inner light, unique to each one of us that only we can put out if we choose to turn away from God.⁷

I find that embodying my intentions helps me live them afterward. As I read this prayer, please turn on your candle.

Kindle a flame within our hearts, O God
And let your light shine through.

Kindle a flame within our hearts, O God
And let your justice shine through.

Kindle a flame within our hearts, O God
And let your hope shine through

Kindle a flame within our hearts, O God
And let your peace shine through.

Kindle a flame within our hearts, O God⁸
And let your love shine through.

And we say together: Amen.

***Sources of worship materials selected by the preacher**

The hymn, “This Little Light of Mine,” was sung immediately after this sermon, with candles lit and held high by those present. This hymn may be found in the *New Century Hymnal* #525 (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995)

Responsive Reading: Psalm 148

First Testament: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

Gospel: Luke 2: 22-40

All the above were taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*

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Emanuel Swedenborg: *True Christianity* #718 and #774 (*New Century Edition*)

⁷ Based on Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* No. 718 and No. 774; with thanks to Rev. Dr. Wilma Wake’s sermon “Hope in Today’s World.” (accessed on 30 December 2017)

<http://www.swedenborgiancommunity.org/content.cfm?id=3342>

⁸ “Kindle a flame” is by Philip Garside. More information is available at <https://giftsinopenhands.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/4817/> (accessed 30 December 2017)