

“Taking a Cue from Janus”

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On the cover of today’s order of service, you’ll see a depiction of the god Janus, a Roman god -- some say, it’s a much older divinity, perhaps Etruscan. Evidently, thousands of years ago, this deity was very popular with the masses, even though it lacked the luster and power of his more famous brothers and sisters in the Roman pantheon. Janus was the god of gates, and also of doors. His likeness, as you can see, is rather unique in that literally he was two-faced: one looking forward; and one always looking behind. One peering toward the past and another envisioning the future. His likeness on doors served as a reminder that every entrance, every gate, was also an exit. It’s appropriate that the month of January is named in his honor. For this is clearly a threshold.

Curiously, we are told that Janus had a temple in Rome, the gates of which were always closed in times of peace. Only in times of war were the temple gates opened. I imagine that in times of war, the public would come and make their offerings, asking for divine intervention to protect their children who had gone to war. Now the cynic in me whispers that the Roman leadership was instrumental in keeping the cult of Janus alive. The Romans were a practical people, very pragmatic. They were a race of lawyers and engineers. And their leaders understood all too well how to wield power and how to maintain it at any costs. As long as the people flocked to the sacred chambers of this or that deity and asked for protection for themselves and their children, rather than going to the halls of government and insisting, say, for peace or bread, the temple doors would remain open, and peace and bread would remain elusive.

This god, this Janus, is no longer revered, but old habits die hard. The Roman pantheon was replaced long ago, but not our basic needs, our basic desires and drives. In our own day, we do not burn incense to this god, but we pay tribute to the notion of time and thresholds, with our many calendars, appointment books, clocks and watches. We can calculate how many hours there are in the work week, how many days remain until our vacation, how many days remain until the school resumes. We even modify our activities so that our schedules will coincide with that of our favorite sports teams. We have learned to program the vcr – some of us, that is – to record our favorite television shows.

For most of us though, we tend to focus on the more common of Janus, as the god of gates, and we tend to take stock of our lives at this time of year. It’s worth remembering that time is a human invention, a contrivance, if you will, but we are obsessed with it. There are several good reasons for this. Keeping time is one of the hallmarks of being civilized. You may remember that among the ancients Greeks, it was Kronos – time – that was first among the Titans. Most ancient is that concept. Our early forebears learned to record lunar cycles, the passage of seasons, and that led to astronomy. That, in turn, made agriculture possible and thus civilization became viable.

It is worth noting that most of the timetables that have been handed down to us have strong religious overtones. The names of days of the week were religious in origin. Here we speak of days such as Thursday, which originally was the day of Thor. Wednesday, which was a day set aside to honor Wodin, and so forth and so on. The bias carries on into the names we have given to our months, Janus being a very good example. But this goes even deeper. As I mentioned, just the other week, we of the West commonly reckon our concept of years according to a time table that notes the birth of Jesus as the pivotal moment in human history. So when we speak of the year 2004, we are saying that it is two thousand and four years after the alleged birth of Jesus. As a convention, it is rather firmly entrenched in our culture. And obviously not all peoples of the earth share this focus. Various faith communities still follow their own particular customs and conventions, Jews, Muslims, pagans, even. And they must feel like dual citizens, keeping one eye fixed on their lunar calendar and one eye on our solar calendar.

But still we come to this time, this January, this month of thresholds. We have crossed what is in fact a mental construct, something that we have agreed to observe. And it is a powerful symbol -- artificial, perhaps, but powerful all the same. And our ability to measure and mark time is essential to our notions of consciousness. There are mystics, I am told, who speak of the eternal now, but they seem to be in the minority. By and large, our civilization depends on the ability to see the past and to project into the future: where would we be without our watches?

Some of us have made New Year's resolutions; others have given up hope of change, and so we plod on. But let us put this past in perspective and let us talk of the past and let us talk of vision, the two faces, if you will, of Janus: memory and vision. We can speak of our own lives, during the time of meditation, I asked you to look at some of the milestones of your own life. If we expand our thoughts to include our families, and even this congregation, you will no doubt be aware of many changes. Some perhaps have been modest, others profound.

When we begin to assess all the changes, we realize, how quickly the year has passed! It's really been extraordinary, in terms of all that has filled these past twelve months, both for ourselves, for myself and for this congregation. We have had a celebration of memory, ALUUC's fiftieth anniversary. It was an important milestone. There was another important milestone, both for me, and I hope for this congregation, in the calling of it's first full time settled minister. There will be challenges, some of which will echo through the years to come, some of which will remind others of discussions long past. Money and personalities have been and will continue to be dominant concerns for this congregation. We will need to bring to the table these discussions and discuss them candidly and show respect for one another, and listen. But it's also a bridge. I think of one important bridge that we will be building and that is with the Habitat for Humanity project that this congregation is going to be engaged in. It's an exciting project. It's unique. It will bring together people from different faith communities, and bring us together in what we are calling "the House of Abraham". In this project, there will be Jews from several synagogues. There will be Muslims. There will be Christians

from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, and there will be Unitarian Universalists. Now their leadership knows who we are, but the rank and file do not, and I think that they will be pleasantly surprised to discover who we are.

Then there are the more global concerns and the need for global bridges. While I was considering what to discuss today, I found myself re-reading Mark Twain. What a cynical retch he was! But he had his point. I chose that particular reading because it sounded so familiar. The more things change, as the French say, the more they stay the same. The seed was planted one hundred years ago, and perhaps fifty years ago, and perhaps one thousand years ago, and again and again and again the same seed is planted. And again and again and again people of faith are called to respond.

As I looked over some of the different issues that I thought were rather pertinent this year, I also found myself re-reading some of the things I wrote two years ago. And let me share some with you. This is from October, 2001, written two after the events of September 11:

I, for one, am wary when politicians begin implicating God in their causes. In fairness, I suppose politicians must be irked when ministers discuss politics. When politics co-opt with religion or vice versa, slogans mix with scripture and secular symbols are interwoven with sacred ones, producing a peculiar hybrid. It is no secret that resolve is steel when political rhetoric invokes the name of God. Such rhetoric is ancient. One that comes immediately into mind is the battle cry, "Deus vult!" which is "God wills it!" that launched the Crusades. It is true that Thomas Jefferson wrote that he hoped this republic would 'erect a wall of separation between church and state'. On the other hand, I think it was John Adams who suggested that any such separation was 'more akin to a shifting line'. Both men, mind you, had Unitarian sympathies. Both held deep to religious and political convictions and were in affect, incarnations of the tensions inherent in church and state relations. Keeping these complexities in mind, I offer a few suggestions and questions. I would ask you to be charitable and accept that these arise from an essentially religious conviction. When war becomes a primary national focus, our attention is apt to be diverted from the ills that plague our society. I hope that our national zeal does not sacrifice the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised, the innocent. People in high places are drawing lines that define friend and foe. I wonder what criteria will be used to define terrorism. No doubt, politics will influence whether one group is regarded as terrorists or freedom fighters. I further wonder what concessions we will make with governments that terrorize their own citizens. And what of honest-to-goodness agitators? We not Jesus, Gandhi and Mandela, to name but a few, branded and punished as agitators dangerous to their respective states? Is it not probable that those in power throughout the world will seize on this as an expedient time to silence all those who agitate for change? Most of all, I find myself wondering whether we will address the basic political, social and economic ills that promote the deep hatred and ignorance that spawn terrorism? Otherwise, will we not, like the Herculean myth, merely be fighting the Hydra that regains two new heads for

every one chopped off? This is, as our political leaders say, a dangerous and difficult time. I will say a prayer for them and for all of us. I hope you will do the same. - October, 2001.

We have seen, we have heard much religious rhetoric this past year, the past several years. We have heard how people are championed to make the pledge of allegiance to take it to the Supreme Court so that the phrase 'under God' can remain. We have heard how a judge in the South has fought to have a granite stone with the ten commandments in a courthouse. Recently I read how the Grand Canyon now has plaques that have been replaced that had been removed some years ago, with Biblical versus. And how a creationist book, explaining how the Grand Canyon is really only several thousand years old, is now on sale at the Grand Canyon, in the National Park Service bookstore. You have heard how Pat Robertson has recently told how God has told him that George Bush will win a decisive victory in the coming election in November. There has been much rhetoric about this war that has invoked the name of God and religious purpose. You have heard how representatives of our government has said, "Our god is bigger than yours."

These represent a tribal notion of God, a petty notion of God. I find them deeply offensive. I find it deeply offensive that people would mix politics and religion, and yet I cringe because I feel that a gauntlet has been thrown down. And that we have a choice, to be silent and walk away, or to respond. And there are issues that also invoke the name of God. What shall happen with women and their right to choose? Shall gays and lesbians be given the right to marry?

I'm reminded in Twain that he spoke of various slogans, which have been offered. One of the slogans he mentioned is *our country: right and wrong*. We don't use that slogan any more, but what are some of the slogans we have heard? *Support the troops*. *In God we trust*. *The defense of marriage*. *Love it or leave it*. I don't know what these slogans mean. I hear them: *Support the troops*. What does that look like? What does it mean? Does it mean we keep breeding and sending more troops? That we keep looting the treasury to finance this war? Is that what supporting the troops means? Does it mean bringing them home? Certainly people in power, have a certain agenda and they would silence those who would criticize their understanding of the slogan. *In God we trust*. Which god? One of the things that I read recently from Twain is that no one, no one, believes in God we trust, not even the minister. They all take their coins at face value. *The defense of marriage*. It is said that if we extend the basic rights of marriage, the protections, to people who are gay and lesbian, that it will somehow undermine the institution of marriage. How in God's name is that possible? What do they possibly mean? It's absurd.

I'm tired of slogans, and yet I know that this is an election year and you will hear many, many more slogans. I know that people of faith, people of good intentions, have tried to resist, have tried to stand their ground. I'm reminded that a year ago, I and many others, met in caucuses. We had meetings to discuss peace. We had posted placards in our lawns. We went to marches. By the millions we came and yet we were dismissed

as a focus group. And so this leads me to a question of power. There are people who have power and are not afraid or ashamed to use it because they have it and they feel they have the right to exercise it. And people who exercise power, who punish others, scare people like you, people like me. And I'm struck by how quickly the demonstrations dissipated once the bombs began to fall and how the slogans drove people away from the streets and back to their homes, back to watching events, in "embedded press reports".

I'm reminded that power needs an identified enemy and so it is that we will have more alerts, I suppose, again the cynic in me. Not necessarily because there are actual threats to airliners, but it's good to yank our chains and to remind us who has power and to serve as a warning, lest we get too uppity. There are millions in the world yearning for peace. There are millions who approve of this war. There is a great divide. If you turn again to the depiction of Janus, it serves, I think, as a depiction for much of our society. There are people who do follow a tribal god, who do follow the politics of power. There are people on the other side who follow the politics of peace and justice and mercy. They face in different directions. They never see one another. And I thought about this as I received and read my most issue of *The World*. There were several articles that I thought were absolutely brilliant, which is to say: I could have written them! (Laughter.) They expressed the views that I agreed with. And it occurred to me that there are millions of people in this country who read other journals, far more people than there are Unitarian Universalists, and their journals are equally brilliant to them.

If we do not face one another, we continually oppose and we will continually tear one another apart, and with it this country, this democracy and our values. It is when these two faces can turn, and we build a bridge, like Clare spoke of, that is when we have a hope for dialogue, for conversation, perhaps even conversion. In this coming year, I pray for peace. But more importantly, I pray for those conversations. I think it's that important. I think our very survival depends upon it, and so may it be.