



## *“No Time Like the Present”*

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**December 31, 2006**

The First Sunday after the Epiphany

New Year’s Eve. New Year’s resolutions. Polls show that about 60% of Americans make New Year’s resolutions. I, for one, always do. And my #1 resolution is always to lose ten pounds during the coming year. I guarantee that I will break that resolution by tomorrow at this time. But, I’m not alone. The goal to lose weight is, not surprisingly, the most frequent resolution.

Which is a long way of saying that New Year’s is overwhelmingly about time. The passing of time. As we look back on the year just finished, regrets are inevitable – unless you happen to be those among us who consider themselves perfect. Common regrets are failures to love enough, failures to cherish those who are close to us. We resolve not to carry quarrels and animosity over into the New Year. The holidays also seem to be tailor-made for nursing grudges – reminding us of unresolved family tensions and occasions for neglect. Those family members who visited, only to remind us how irritating their presence can be. Those relatives, or erstwhile friends, who failed to call. We hope that the New Year will be a clean slate, a fresh start, but inevitably we bring our old baggage into the New Year.

Let me suggest an alternative way of looking at time. In addition to chewing over the past and planning for the future, we might try to be attentive to the present moment – wherever circumstance takes us and with whom we happen to be.

I am not advocating the ancient Roman concept of *carpe diem*, or “seize the day.” I am not calling an irresponsible hedonism. Hardly. This is “church” after all. Rather, let me recall the wise words of that great theologian, John Lennon of the Beatles, who once said: “Life is what happens while we are planning for something else.” Rabbi Tarfon, who taught in the synagogues of Palestine at about the same time as Jesus, put it more elegantly: “It is not your obligation to complete the task of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist from doing all that you can at each moment.”

What I am suggesting is that we not become so focused on plans for the future, or so crippled by past experience, that we do not become attentive to the experience of the present.

Let me tell you a small story. Just over a year ago, four pastors who belonged to a movement called “Christian Peacemaker Teams” were abducted from their apartment in Baghdad. Their intention in going there was to bear witness to peace in the midst of all the bloodletting. One was British, two were Canadians and one was an American Quaker named (appropriately) Tom Fox.<sup>1</sup> After about four months in captivity, the body of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Englishman, George Fox, was the founder of the Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers.

American was found on a street in Baghdad. Several days later the remaining three were rescued by British troops, after 118 days in captivity. The three survivors have recently gone public with their story. Part of it is relevant to being in the “present moment.”

As one of the Canadian pastors, Jim, tells it: “Tom became the prophet of the present moment. ‘All we have now,’ he would say, ‘is the now. The past is a fiction and the future doesn’t exist.’ He would tell us about his meditations, how, as he passed through his fingers the chains that bound his wrists, he would receive and send God’s light to the count of each breath. He strained with his whole being to let go of everything – even the hope of release – and just be present to the present. He imagined that our daily task was to build a ‘Palace of the Present Moment,’ a refuge from our 11-foot square, paint peeling room of never-ending gloom.”

But, inevitably, initial feelings of challenge and inspiration gave way to theological irritation. In their confined space, the present moment was often a living hell. Harry’s burps, the way Norman wiggled his toes or how Tom chewed his food irritated beyond endurance.

Jim said: “Each day, each hour, each minute I was confronted with a choice: withdraw, clench my heart into a fist and conserve my widow’s mite of emotional energy or open my heart, inhabit the moment, be generous with acceptance and conversation and listening.

“This, I began to see, is what it means to be born again. The present moment is the birth canal of the incarnation.”

Let me get all “theological” on you for a few minutes. Ours is an incarnational faith, a belief that we emphasize at Christmas. Matthew and Luke tell the traditional Christmas story. The first Christmas commemorates an occasion when the eternal God intersected with human time in the birth of a child especially touched by the divine. Ours is a religion rooted in historical time, compared with Buddhism or Hinduism in which time is forever cyclical.

But the incarnation happened not just once in history and for all time. Each moment can be incarnational as well, responsive to the ever-present Christ that is within each of us and in the love that connects us.

We are only human after all, and we are hard-wired feel rooted in the past and to plan for the future. My work sometimes takes me to Washington, DC. The National Archives Building there carries the inscription, “The past is prologue.” I’m never sure whether that is a profound thought or a truism. Either way, a sense of history never hurts, nor does prudent planning – as long as it does not distract us from the present moment.

Two saints in my personal pantheon expressed better than I can this sense of living in the present moment, being always attentive to the God-with-us in all that we do. Reverend Daniel Berrigan, who is now quite elderly, still leads a peace vigil in Union Square Park each Wednesday evening. When asked recently if he thought his actions and those of his sisters and brothers really can make any difference in our dangerous world, he replied: “We bear witness to peace, not because it is effective, but because it is the right thing to do.”

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose day we commemorate on January 15, similarly reminds us that, “Faith means climbing the first rung on the ladder without knowing where it may lead.” Living – and responding to God’s call – in the sanctified present.

**Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims**  
**Sermon 12/31/06**

The apostle Paul knew a lot about living in the God-filled presence. Recall the words of today's Epistle reading from his letter to the Colossians, written while he, himself, was in prison in chains: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the word of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Not bad for a New Year's resolution. But even better to live out in the eternal, incarnational, present.

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