

SURRENDER WITHOUT GIVING UP

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Reading: John 1: 1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

On the first Sunday of the New Year it is common for us to wonder about the future. Some might think that today is the opportunity to imagine a new beginning or a fresh start. People make all kinds of resolutions about weight loss, smoking, exercise, saving money, and so on. You might seriously consider some of these resolutions when:

You step on a talking scale and it says, "One at a time, please!"

You're wearing a yellow suit and people two blocks away yell, "Taxi!"

You put on your Honda instead of getting into it.

It's time to resolve to make more money when you were robbed and all that the thief got was practice.¹

St. John was talking about a new beginning when he wrote this prologue of his gospel. People sometimes make the mistake of thinking that this prologue is about history or the material creation of the world. It is not. It is a way of talking about the relationship between God and humanity. The real issue is the character of God and the values of life and light in our world. These are the values that are meant to sustain life, despite the forces of darkness and evil that we confront as human beings.

¹ Families on Line Magazine, <http://www.familiesonlinemagazine.com/new-year-resolution-jokes.html>, downloaded 12/29/2010.

Another way to phrase it is this: God enters the world as it is, accepting the reality of pain and suffering, the brokenness of human relationships, and the greed and anger that distorts us as people. God enters the world where women and men want nothing more than to make an honest living, provide good homes and schools for their families, enjoy reasonably good health care and a comfortable retirement. God enters the world, as it is, where people are driven by self-interest and can be most charitable.

What that suggests to me is that God surrenders God's self to the world as it is. It is a profoundly Sacred acceptance of the way things are, especially when things could be better. John declares a new beginning, a radically fresh start to human history when he states that the Word is among us. Hannah Arendt refers to this as natality, the breaking in of new life. She wrote:

“The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men (and women) and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope...”²

Natality breaks into our lives when a child is born. The ordinary daily routines of our lives are changed forever. Natality crashes in with the hiring of a new CEO or the calling of a new Senior Minister. The assumptions about the way we do things around here are challenged and changes are made. Natality is the flash of creativity that moves the artist's brush or inspires the inventor's hand. Natality is the surge of energy with which we respond to changed circumstances such as divorce or retirement, promotion or unemployment, death or winning the lottery.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 247.

I have posited two major ideas. The first is the idea that the Sacred One surrenders to the world as it is. God accepts things as they are. Second, Sacred Movement is a new beginning within the world as it is.

Now it seems to me that if 2011 is going to have any sense of a fresh start for us, we, like God, must accept the world the way it is. Now I believe this is a profound matter of faith. We are accustomed to talking about the world through the lens of psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, politics, economics, and so on. I believe we ought to see the world with the eyes of faith. Without blinking, see and receive the world on its own terms. Surrender yourself to this world with all of its natural laws, the unflinching drive to both survive and reproduce; the necessity of food and work; the fact that we are all defensive and sometimes offensive; the dignity of human relationships and our capacity to be absolute jerks. Surrender yourself to the fact that this is the world into whose lap God has delivered you. The surrender includes the fact that your stay on this planet is short lived. Listen to how faith language articulates the surrender.

The Psalmist declared, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (118:24) The Psalmist did not say what kind of day it is; did not say it is a perfect day; did not say there won’t be problems in your day; and did not say you would live through it. Let me push that envelope. Even if this is the day you are going to die, it is still the day that God has given you. And that is something worthy of thanksgiving. But you can only give thanks for the day, no matter what happens to you, if you have surrendered yourself the world and all that dwells therein. Do you know the story of Barbara Makuch? She was called the “Polish rescuer:”

“But she paid dearly for her willingness to aid Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. She helped two Jewish people find protection in the boy's boarding school where she was a teacher. One was a young Jewish boy who successfully passed himself off as a Christian Polish student. The second was a woman doctor who became the school cook. Although they lived on minimal means in a tiny apartment, Barbara and her mother accepted responsibility for a seven-year-old Jewish girl, left with them by the girl's desperate mother. Fearing detection in such a small community, Barbara took the girl on a dangerous journey to Lvov where she placed her in the safe shelter of a convent school.

In Lvov, Barbara joined her sister Halina in her work for the underground organization, Zegota, set up to aid Polish Jews in hiding. On a Zegota courier mission Barbara was caught and subsequently imprisoned, first in a notorious jail, later at Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. During her years in prison and camp, Barbara faced the harshest tests of her courage and endurance. Remarkably, she not only survived but even managed to help save the lives of fellow inmates.”³

Barbara Makuch surrender to the world and the days that God had given her and used that time to be a blessing in the lives of refugees who were being hunted down, wounded, imprisoned, and killed.

I used to think that the words we utter at the graveside, “Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD,” were dreary words indeed. Are these words meant to comfort? Not if you think that life is only a headlong rush to the grave. They do not inspire if you believe that the world is only a place to tempt you with pleasure and punish you for desire. If, on the other hand, these are the words of surrender to the life and hands of God, they are the words of grace.

You see, surrender does not mean to give up. All around the world today there are women and men in the midst of life's cruelest circumstances. I think of Li Dan, a

³ The author of this story is unknown. This story is found at <http://www.wisdomcommons.org/virtue/29-courage/lifestori>. See also <http://www.humboldt.edu/rescuers/book/Makuch/m.contents.W.html>.

Manchurian who gave up his doctoral studies in astrophysics to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China. The AIDS epidemic exploded in central Henan province in the 1990's because of a badly botched blood selling drive. He made a documentary of the Henan peasants' suffering as a result of this blood drive. It left 100,000 AIDS orphans. These children were not recognized by the Chinese government and were not accepted in their communities and schools.

Li Dan decided to open a school for the orphans. The government made him shut it down. He continued to be an advocate for the children. He wrote articles and appeared on news programs. After one news program Li Dan was detained by the police and beaten. Undeterred, Li Dan remains an activist and advocate for all who suffer HIV/AIDS. He said, "I witnessed children becoming homeless; I watched people dying painful and grueling deaths. All of that despair overwhelmed me, but ultimately it has also inspired me." ⁴

Li Dan has never given up. Nor has Asma Jilani Jahangir of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Asma defends Christians and Muslim who are condemned to death because they are alleged to have violated blasphemy laws. An San Suu Kyi of Burma has never given up. You know she has suffered years of arrest under the military junta for her non-violent efforts to bring freedom and democracy to her people. And if you were to visit the Kansas Food Bank, Open Door, Breakthrough Club, the Lord's Diner, and our very own hygiene pantry you will meet all kinds of people who have not given up.

If you were present at our September 11th prayer service perhaps you remember Abdul Arif. Mr. Arif represented the Muslim community that night, offering prayers from the Koran. What you may not know about Mr. Arif is that he is an attorney who has been working tirelessly to create the Mayflower Clinic. The clinic serves people who have lost their jobs and lost their health insurance. The clinic is entirely staffed by immigrant physicians and health care providers. Abdul stated in *The Wichita Eagle* last Friday that the clinic was only an attempt "to solve the health care crisis in the small ways that we can, but also as a way to personally give back to

⁴ "Human Rights Map/Every Human has Rights,"

<http://everyhumanhasrights.org/human-rights-map>. Downloaded 1/1/11.

the United States.”⁵

Surrender but do not give up. I believe that in each and every one of the stories that I have mentioned, and the millions more that could be told, we are witnesses to the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. God is at work every time a new act of compassion and courage rises up to heal and comfort other human beings. I believe that when a new voice speaks of human freedom God’s light is shining on the darkness. I do not care what religion they are, what race they are, what nationality they are, each one is a beacon of God’s truth.

Surrender but do not give up. Life is hard and seldom fair and we all wish that everything could be easier for us. But that is the life of fantasy and not the life of faith. I am reminded of Mary Oliver’s poem, “Halleluiah.”

Everyone should be born into this world happy
and loving everything.
But in truth it rarely works that way.
For myself, I have spent my life clamoring toward it.
Halleluiah, anyway I’m not where I started!

And have you too been trudging like that, sometimes
almost forgetting how wondrous the world is
and how miraculously kind some people can be?
And have you too decided that probably nothing important
is ever easy?
Not, say, for the first sixty years.

Halleluiah, I’m sixty now, and even a little more,
And some days I feel I have wings.⁶

Surrender but never give up.

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⁵ Tiffany Roney, “Group of Professional immigrants Opens Free Clinic,” *The Wichita Eagle*, posted Friday, December 31, 2010 at <http://www.kansas.com/2010/12/31/v-print/1653908/group-of-professionals-immigrants.html>.

⁶ Mary Oliver, “Halleluiah,” *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), p. 19.