

Beginner's Mind
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Ancient Witness: Matthew 9:14-17

Wow. 2020 was some year, wasn't it? I heard so many people say that they were happy to see an end to this year. We've all experienced a certain level of trauma. The novel coronavirus has taken its toll on this country and the entire world. For the past 10 months, we've been taking precautions to avoid infection and to flatten the curve. We've experience illness and death on a massive scale; businesses and school buildings have been shut down; and we've also experienced immense political upheaval. And so this New Year's Day, many were very happy to see this year come to an end.

But January 1st is just an arbitrary day, after all. There isn't anything magical about it. And I have to say, these first nine days of 2021 seem like the the new year was ages ago. This week a mob of loyalist to Donald Trump have overwhelmed police and entered the Capitol Building. This interrupted the process of counting the Electoral College votes for the election of the President and Vice President, causing Senators and Representatives to evacuate and seek safety. There was an armed standoff between police and part of the mob in the House Chamber, five people died, including a police officer, and law enforcement officials used teargas in the rotunda of the iconic and historic building. And we experienced these surreal events, socially distant and in isolation, each in our own homes.

This incident happened in the midst of an unprecedented effort by the President and his supporters to overturn the vote of key states and nullify the election. Republican members of both the House and the Senate raised objections to accepting the votes while the President held a rally decrying a "rigged election," encouraging his followers to descend upon the Capitol Building. There have been calls to impeach the President or to invoke the 25th Amendment to remove him to prevent further disruption at home or abroad over the next two weeks. There have been assurances that the nuclear missile codes would not be exclusively controlled by the President.

And so the citizens of our nation have been traumatized by this series of unfolding events, and 2021 seems to be a continuation of 2020. But the slow rollout of the vaccine and the impending political transition offer us some glimmers of hope. The clouds are starting to clear, even though there are still months to go before there will be more normalcy.

New Year's Day is still a powerful symbol that a new day is approaching. A dawn is coming. And we sing those words of Tennyson's poem:

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;*

Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

*Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.*

*Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.*

These words have taken on a deeper meaning to me this year.

*Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.*

*Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.*

*Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.*

From a spiritual perspective, every day is New Year's Day. We let go of the past and let the old life die to make way for the new and to begin again. We can assume a posture that is not captive to the past. New Years is not the only time we can let go of our failures and disappointments and start over with a clean slate. Every moment is a New Year's celebration.

Howard Thurman, the great theologian and mystic, wrote,

Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born... It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men and women have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of the child - life's most dramatic answer to death - this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge.

About 50 years ago, Shunryo Suzuki wrote his classic book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, helping to bring Buddhism to the West. And he introduced this idea of *shoshin*, which is Japanese for “beginner’s mind.” He famously said: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.” This is the universal spiritual concept that if we want to experience liberation from our captivity—from our suffering and unhappiness, there is a certain kind of “unlearning” that needs to happen—a letting go of our conclusions, our thinking and our evaluations about our situation.

And when we gain this perspective, new worlds open up to us. And where there was a dead end there are possibilities. Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr notes that beginner’s mind is still using your mind, but then letting go of it a bit for awhile, not trusting it too much to be the whole picture, not grasping it too closely, so there’s room for a larger mind to get in.

It’s more like “allowing.” Beginner’s mind is always a humble mind, always knowing that it does not yet fully know. Like the apostle Paul said, we realize that we see things through a darkened and clouded glass and that we know things only in a partial and limited way.

When we begin something and experience something for the first time, that can be stressful, moving us out of our comfort zone. We can feel helpless, displaced and vulnerable. There is comfort in the familiar and the routine. And yet when we have beginner’s mind, we experience things for the first time and become fully alive to that experience, fully present.

This is a state of being in which we enter each new moment fully and awake, and we mindfully start again, again and again.

There’s a story in the Matthew’s gospel when his disciples came to Jesus and asked “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And Jesus brought a child among them and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:1-5)

According to Jesus, we must become a child, we must have beginner’s mind to enter the realm of God. To grow in awareness of the divine that is embedded in the universe, one becomes a child. If one yearns to awaken to a hidden reality that is present in this world, one becomes a child. One pursues not greatness, but embraces not knowing and humility.

Hebrew Scripture scholar, Walter Bruggeman, said hearing the Word of God means that we decide not to congeal. It means that we are open and ready to be changed. One might say that to be advanced in spiritual things means always to be a beginner. It means we don’t congeal. It means to be open, willing to be molded, teachable. To grow out of this is to grow out of God.

There’s another story that we read today from Matthew’s gospel when Jesus was asked why he and his disciples did things differently from the Pharisees and from John’s disciples. And Jesus responds,

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins, otherwise the skin bursts... but wine is put into fresh wineskins.

We can keep repeating the past, putting patches on old ways, making minor adjustments. But we must have the courage to truly begin again, make a fresh start, and change what we do *whole cloth*.

Listen to what Martin Luther King wrote (*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*) that is even more relevant today:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes as a result of automation while profits of the employers remain intact and say "This is not just..."

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing to prevent us from paying adequate wages to schoolteachers... There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid or day laborer. There is nothing except short-sightedness to prevent us from guaranteeing an annual minimum—and livable—income for every American family.

King wrote this over 45 years ago, but it easily could have been written yesterday.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but... one day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

Friends, new lives are possible for each one of us. And a new world is possible for all of us. We can discover these possibilities when we become children, when we adopt the beginner's mind, when we live with openness, humility and a radical acceptance, when we live with awe and wonder in each moment of this miracle we call life.