

HEIGH-HO, HEIGH-HO, IT'S OFF TO WORK WE GO

What is the difference between December and January?

Now, I realize as much as you do that time is a figment of human imagination. We celebrate the beginning of a new year at a time that has no significance to anybody in any way, except that it's midnight nine days after the days have started getting longer again. Our ancient forebears said the day began and ended at sundown. At least that was a meaningful and noticeable event each day. Midnight is just when nobody in their right mind would still be awake. But undaunted, humans in our culture have turned that into part of the celebration. And it helped when, a few years ago, we figured out how to use electricity to make light.

Back in 1999 A.D., our whole culture was getting ready to go wild at the turn of the millennium, A.D. 2000. There were both dire predictions and great hopes – on the basis of absolutely nothing. The original numbering idea had been that the whole creation should feel a vital shift at the birth of the Messiah. We have this great event pinpointed to within eleven years, somewhere between 4 B.C. and 7 A.D. – we think. Nobody has the faintest notion about what month, what day, or what time of day. Wouldn't astrologers love to run an accurate birth chart for Jesus? I have seen six or seven suggested birth charts for Him – alas, all of them complete guesswork.

Nevertheless, believing Jesus to be God's Messiah, we changed our calendars to reflect this belief. Everything before Christ is one era, B.C. Everything after the birth of Jesus is another era, A.D. (*Anno Domini* – “in the year of our Lord”). Of course, that is no longer politically correct, because fewer and fewer people believe in Jesus, and even those who do believe in Him think it's not nice to offend those who do not. So now we are stuck with C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (before the Common Era). How exciting and inspiring is that?

There were some minor glitches, of course. The monk who was assigned the task of figuring it all out, Dionysius Exiguus (who invented the Christian Era around what we call A.D. 500), did not have a telephone or fax machine, and reference libraries were few and far between in his day. He did the best he could to figure out when Jesus was born and then dated the new era as starting December 25, 753 A.U.C. – that is,

ab urbe condita: “from the founding of the city” ... Rome. So A.U.C. dated the calendar from the founding of Rome, and that date is even less accurate than the date of Jesus’ birth. But Dionysius Exiguus took his best guess and set the year 1 A.D. to correlate to January 1, 754 of the previous Roman calendar.

Also, in careless enthusiasm, Dionysius named the first year of the Christian Era “1 A.D.” That is, he forgot to put a zero year between B.C. and A.D. (You all had to live a year before you got to celebrate your first birthday, right?) Of course, most of the world did not pay any attention to such details. They celebrated the start of the year 2000 confident that it was a significant turning point in history and in our entire cosmos. It probably was, but no more so than any other day of any other year. Even so, it is interesting to wonder how many times and in how many ways we humans make a big deal on the basis of absolutely nothing.

Well, if we had time, I would love to delight you with the intricacies of the Julian calendar and the Gregorian calendar, and how Pope Gregory XIII simply eliminated ten days in 1582 (October 5th became October 15th by his decree) so he could get the Vernal Equinox back onto March 21st. But then, of course, everybody had to decide whether or not to go along with Gregory’s new system. Great Britain thought about it for a hundred and seventy years before taking the plunge in 1752. Russia got around to it in 1918. It can drive you nuts if you are trying to figure out when George Washington was born. So if we really wanted to count dawn-to-dark days for two thousand years, we would have celebrated the new millennium in the early hours of January 10th in the year 2001. But any way you figure, it is based on absolutely nothing. Calendar time is a figment of human imagination. All time is *God’s* time. Every day you wake up is as special and precious as any other day you will ever get.

Even if calendar time is a human contrivance, seasons are not. What is the difference between December and January? Some of us like December better than January; some of us like January better than December; some of us just wade through both of them, waiting for spring. Be that as it may, most of us associate December with parties, pleasure, anticipation, visits, and a kind of fantasy atmosphere. On the other hand, January is more often associated with starkness, duty, reality, hard work, enduring effort. If December is gifts and gatherings, January is bills and back to work. At least that is the psychological flavor for most people.

Starting with a pronouncement in the story of the Garden of Eden – that work is a curse – we often encounter a negative attitude toward work among some people. *To accomplish*, however, is one of life's greatest joys. Do you ever wrestle with this contradiction?

A lot of people dream of retirement so they can stop working. Others dream of retirement so they can finally get to their *real* work. The so-called “Protestant work ethic,” however much maligned, is the conviction of faithful people that work is an integral part of the Christian Life. They know that Christ has come to reverse the curses of The Fall – to undo the results of getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Therefore, those who know Christ should be feeling the “curse” of work lifted from them. They begin to speak of work as a sacred privilege – as part of the joy of the redeemed. I know this is really true for many, but Americans are not often pictured as people who work for the delight of accomplishing and contributing, or who see their work as an act of worship.

The passage we read from Ephesians knows that each one of you is given gifts and abilities that are specific to you, and that your contributions are needed for the Kingdom. It further believes that these gifts and abilities are awakened to new heights as you awaken to the presence of Christ in your life. Paul's letter to the Ephesians fervently hopes that you will see and use these gifts and abilities as your “work” here in this world, and as your special responsibility as part of the body of Christ. Furthermore, it is this work – if we each take it seriously – that builds up the body of Christ, accomplishes the real purpose of the church here, and increases love on the earth.

Oh my friends, do not go into another new year without knowing that your work is sacred, that your work is part of your spiritual pilgrimage, and that Christ wants to be with you in your work. And when I say “work,” do not just hear “job.” Your efforts, your striving, and any task you take seriously are your work. What is the difference between doing something – doing anything – just because it needs doing and somehow you got stuck with it, and doing the same thing in Christ's presence, in partnership with your Lord, “*as unto the Lord*”?

* * *

Many people, I suspect, *do* want to work, only not at what they are presently doing or not under their present circumstances. They dream and plan for some shift from a dull and difficult job to an

exciting, meaningful, and rewarding job. Or they long for fewer restrictions and problems so they can accomplish more with less interference.

So what is *your* concept of work, and how does it fit in with your faith? The Bible has a lot to say about work. Just a few quotes: “*Be ready for any honest work.*” (Titus 3:1) “*Anyone who will not work shall not eat.*” (II Thessalonians 3:10) “*Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ.*” (Colossians 3:23-24)

In the early church and down through the ages, Christians have struggled with the meaning of their labor and how it relates to their faith and the kind of life they are trying to live. Why should we be any different? Actually, it is amazing and disturbing that so much of current American society draws no connection between work and faith in God. Surveys show that as high as eighty percent of the population claims to believe in God, but what is the impact of that belief at the workplace?

One of the common denominators of all spiritual or religious awakening is the “Call To Meaning.” When God finally breaks through, we seem to wake up, as if out of a fog or a dream, to discover that we are part of things much larger than we had realized. In some tiny yet awesome way, we are a part of all that is going on around us.

And if we are Christians, our language and our faith say that the Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ is always seeking to make conscious contact with us, and that if we will cooperate, we will be led into a life full of mystery, hope, and love – *but also* that we will be asked to play a part. In short, we will be given tasks to accomplish. All Christians have work to do. Only, we are not working just for ourselves. We are working for our Lord.

So we discover that all our stories about conversion include some kind of assignment. This pattern becomes very clear in the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Origen, Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards. All of them have stories of conversion that lead them into an assignment – something they are supposed to accomplish for God. And I could name many of you too; quite a few. I will not go into it because some of you get tired of my

saying it over and over, especially those of you who have not heard it yet. It is nonetheless part of our heritage, part of our faith history: To be converted is to receive a vocation, a *vocatio* – a calling from God to accomplish something. To be converted is to have work to do. Conversion always includes an assignment to accomplish something for our God.

As you know, it is part of my own chosen pattern of ministry to spend a fair amount of time talking with people. About a third of the people who talk with me on a regular basis, at any given moment, are not church members. I usually lean over backward not to “sell” this church or my particular brand of faith to those who have not chosen it, so I regularly encounter people from all faiths or from no faith. Yet I have never seen anybody grow or get better who did not in some earnest way start *using* their own faith. There is never any improvement until we stop merely complaining (some complaining is okay) and stop thinking about how we want things or wish things *were* – and find ourselves called (wanting) to serve something or someONE beyond ourselves. It is not how things *are* that makes life bearable; it is the beauty or truth we sense, come to believe in, and begin to reach for or serve that makes life bearable here. No couple in trouble that I ever knew found any real improvement until they stopped *merely* thinking about their own relationship – their own needs and desires and resentments and satisfactions – and found some God or some thing or some WAY for which they wanted to serve and work together.

We are called to meaning beyond ourselves – to live for goals and plans larger than those we once chose for ourselves. Some, like Moses and Peter, are called out of patterns of sheer survival; others are called out of despair, like Joseph or Paul or Augustine or Luther. But one thread or theme is always present: People awaken to meaning larger than they had imagined. God invites us to help bring these things into being. Where God is present, there is always more going on than meets the eye. And Christians know that God is always present.

If that's the case, why are we so fascinated with calendar time – a figment of human imagination – when we could be thinking instead about *God's* time? What is *God* doing? What is *God* planning? How and in what ways is God inviting each of us to help with the work of God's Kingdom? I know some people whose first major task each morning is to decide whether or not they “like” the day: Has God done a good job? What do I think of the temperature? Is there enough sun? Is there too much wind? It is God's job to make the day, and their job

to critique it. So several times before noon each day, they feel required to publicly rate the day according to their opinion of how well God has done. What chutzpah! If it is God's job to make the day, it is our job to enjoy it – to discover, if we can, what it is for, what beauty lies hidden within it, what opportunities await us. *“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* (Psalm 118:24) And who knows: maybe if we practice appreciating the days God has made, in time we will even learn how to appreciate the people God has made.

In any case, for us it is never simply calendar time; it is always God's time. God always calls us to meaning beyond ourselves. Usually that comes with a hint that we are more important to God than we had ever realized before. That in turn makes us uncomfortable; it is too much responsibility. We do not even like disappointing our mothers or our spouses or our children, never mind God. But what a shame and waste if we know all the right words about “Jesus, God, and salvation” but do not know what conversion really means. What a shame if we hear and know “the Gospel” but do not start living in a different way and for different purposes.

What I am suggesting is that some people are not heading back into January with the enthusiasm of that song of the Seven Dwarfs: “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to work we go.” Some people have a familiar alternate attitude: “Ho hum” instead of “Heigh-ho.” But that is for those of us who do not yet know or live for a meaning beyond ourselves. It is for those of us who still do not feel the connections between December and January – between Christmas and our vocatio.

Religion is always a problem. Religion is always asking too much of us. In the Old Covenant, there is great stress laid on living in harmony with the community of God. The “chosen people” are chosen to demonstrate the orderly and peaceful life that God has designed for them. But this requires that everybody must agree that they will not lie, cheat, or steal from each other. Everybody needs to get what they need to survive and thrive, but they must not harm each other in the process. That's the core of the Old Covenant: no murder; no malicious gossip; no stealing each other's mates; no slander or coveting what others have – and always keep God at the center and forefront of everything.

Paul is, of course, a *New* Covenant man. That does not repeal any of the Old Covenant, but it moves on to more individual considerations. We are all created with special gifts and abilities. As our relationship

with the Holy Spirit evolves, we become more aware of our own identity, and this means we increasingly hear “the call” of the Spirit to contribute our own special abilities to the welfare and benefit of the body of Christ. (Paul says it in many places, but nowhere more clearly than the Ephesians passage we just read.) That is both pleasing and alarming at the same time. We like to be useful, but it also feels like a great responsibility. How do we train our gifts and apply them in a world that does not think in these terms? And there is often a dichotomy between what the world wants from us and what would benefit the community – the Kingdom – of our Lord.

Excuse me for being so elementary, but it is out of and off of such spiritual awakening that we can talk sincerely about *Immanuel* – about what it means to have “Christ with us.” The whole essence and purpose and focus of Christmas can be summed up in that one word, *Immanuel*: God with us.

In some manner, by some language, the presence of Christ with us means the invisible Kingdom is *also* here. Some people think that all of life is a “true/false” exam: visible means “true”; invisible means “false.” Yet Paul reminds us that the Christian perspective inverts this: “*The things that are seen are passing away, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*” (II Corinthians 4:18) And the presence of Christ with us means the invisible Kingdom is *also* here. If the King is here, the *Kingdom* is here. Amen! Hallelujah! (Well, somebody had to say it.) If the King is here and the Kingdom is here, that means we get to serve the King and live in the Kingdom NOW. So Christmas is the party, but Christmas also means “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it’s off to work we go!”

* * *

Now, some of you are waiting around until you can find your vocatio before you start serving the Kingdom. Or you feel like you must wait until it all gets absolutely clear before you can begin to make any necessary changes and “get into it” – that is, before you start “really” serving the Kingdom. But seeking our vocatio is part of seeking our true identity under Christ, and *seeking* is just as faithful and dedicated a task as finding and fulfilling. So finding our vocatio and maneuvering into it are part of the faithful life. We do not have to be positive or certain about everything, and we do not have to fear mistakes. It is one of the joys of knowing Jesus. Whenever the Great Prince awakens us from our sleep with the kiss of love, from that moment on we long to serve Him and His Kingdom. Part of that

awakening is the realization that we have much to contribute, much to give – if we can only figure out how to train our gifts and how to apply them in this broken world.

Whenever we do not know what we are supposed to be doing, we concentrate on trying to be more faithful and obedient in whatever we are *already* doing. That always invites the Spirit to guide us into more and clearer paths, if and when the Spirit wants to. “*You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.*” (Matthew 25:21) That is the principle we trust.

* * *

If you feel a little fuzzy about some of this sometimes, it might help to remember that the whole “Christian Enterprise” is rather confused and shaky on this issue sometimes. Today we have a whole slew of churches that are in the entertainment business, and we have a whole bunch of churches that are into politics or into spiritualism or into psychic phenomenon. In between are the faithful communities of followers that are still trying to be “the church in the world” – *in but not of the world* – the people of Jesus, come what may.

Churches in the entertainment business do not have congregations; they have audiences. Normally and naturally, they are the richest and the largest. There is no reason for jealousy; they have their reward. Churches in politics do not have congregations either; they have lobbies – people to march, write letters, organize protests, be on some crusade. Anything will do, as long as the focus is on making a better world and not on Jesus. Churches still trying to be churches *in but not of the world* are faith communities trying to live a WAY, to walk a Path: trying, on a daily basis, to BE – as individuals, at home and work and school – faithful citizens of a new and invisible Kingdom. And yes, even though the earthly kingdoms still operate all around them.

If you are in the entertainment business, you have to care if people “liked the show.” If you are into politics, you have to keep asking: Who and how many did we persuade? Are we going to swing the tide, get the vote, pass the law, make the changes? If you are a church, those are maybe interesting questions, but they have only minor interest or relevance. There are other, far more important questions: Is this what Christ wants of us? Is this the faithful choice? Does this match the vision and purpose we have as the body of Christ in the world? What has that got to do with pleasing an audience – unless the audience is God?

Some people still think we get to vote on truth. Or they ask me if I think Christianity can still “work” in today’s world. Do I care if it “works”? Do they think I think it’s some toy train I buy and put under a tree? I worship God because I perceive God’s presence here, and I love Christ because Christ first loved me. What do I care if it “works”? And even if it did “work” (whatever that means), when and how would I know?

* * *

So what is *your* notion of Christian labor? Today, for the most part, the church officially speaks as if “church work” is what Christians do in their spare time or in some small portion of their spare time, and the “work of the church” is our “missions” or our programs as a denomination or as a local church. No wonder the church seems irrelevant or feels like such a minor sideshow to so many people. We pool our leftover money and, after paying salaries and building and maintaining our facilities, we use the rest to “help the poor” or “save the world” in some way. (What are the chances?) In a way it is impressive that we accomplish as much as we do with what is left over from what is left over. But is that the real “work of the church”?

I have some minor interest in the work of the church, but what I really care about is the church at work. What we accomplish together in some of our spare time is important if it strengthens us and keeps us growing in love and in awareness of *Immanuel* – of the God who is with us. But is it your understanding that we all work all week long, yet that does not matter? Or that it is a different world altogether, and then we come together for a few hours on the weekend, do something in our spare time, and that is what is *really* important?

The primary work of the church is you at work, not “church work.” How many times do we need to be reminded? You do not *go* to church – you *are* the church. The church is at work whenever and wherever *you* are at work (and it is idle, goofing off, dishonest, compassionate, or effective whenever you are). The major impact of your life is not likely to be in the off-hours you can volunteer for the institutional side of the church’s physical organization. (Which is not to belittle my appreciation for the amazing amount that some of you do for us. The outer world may think you are just volunteering, but on the inside you are extremely disciplined and intentional. Your whole focus is on serving your Lord.) In any case, you ARE the body of Christ. Where you put most of your energy, most of your waking

hours, and most of your time, *that* is where you truly serve the Kingdom. No church institution or staff of pastors can monitor or supervise that. Only the Holy Spirit can. Therefore *you* must fight to keep awake to and aware of and obedient to the Holy Spirit every single day. You are on duty as Christians – servants of Jesus Christ – wherever you go. And not just to say His name a lot, but to do what He wants done wherever in the world you find yourself. (We are not the head; we are *the body* of Christ.)

Christians go to work *with* Jesus and *for* Jesus, and they know that Jesus is the invisible Supervisor whom they will meet and watch for and listen for wherever they go. I am *not* talking about people making themselves obnoxious with a lot of “God talk,” when they are supposed to be tending to the quality of their performance and somebody else is paying for their time. I am talking about serving the invisible Christ wherever we are. That means we can stop working for our own ends, wait patiently for the Spirit’s promotions, and do all that we do in the awareness that whatever is going on in the outside, visible world, we are really working for our Lord – and to please Christ is our only serious aim.

If you have the blahs this January and feel like work is a drag, maybe your soul is trying to tell you something: that part of your life has somehow become disconnected from the Spirit. It is not *who* you are or *where* you are but *whom you serve* that makes the difference between “heigh-ho” and “ho hum.”

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THIS DOCUMENT AND ANY RECORDING
ARE DUE TO COMBINING REWORKED VERSIONS OF THIS SERMON
INTO ONE DEFINITIVE TEXT VERSION.