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Wednesday December 31, 2014

Swearing off upward mobility

By Jim Taylor

Last year, I made only one New Year's Resolution -- not to make any more New Year's Resolutions. They always get broken, don't they?

I managed to keep that resolution for over 11 months. Until Saturday December 6. On that day, I made my first resolution for the year 2015

I resolved not to climb any more ladders.

A light bulb in our home had burned out, high above the floor. I propped a ladder against the wall and climbed up. As I reached for the defective bulb, the ladder slipped.

I have taken yoga classes. Beginner yoga does not include levitation. When the ladder came down, so did I. One the way down, I ripped one of Joan's embroidery pictures off the wall, squashed a potted poinsettia, and knocked a row of books flying.

I also turned one shin into a miniature replica of a World War I battlefield, and split the other shin badly enough that it didn't stop bleeding for six hours.

I consider myself lucky. This is my third fall from grace, so to speak. I fell off a scaffold 15 years ago. I fell off a garden wall two years ago. One of those falls resulted in a smashed elbow, the other in a fractured lumbar vertebra. But neither injury left me with any permanent disability, although they easily could have.

I think I might be pushing my luck to risk another fall. So I have sworn off ladders.

Cultural symbol

It's probably time, anyway. The ladder is a symbol of upward mobility. One climbs the ladder to success, or at least to the corner office.

I don't find it a comfortable metaphor, anymore. Not for me, at least. Climbing ladders too often involves climbing over other people. Sometimes stepping on hands. Or even kicking competitors off the ladder.

Genesis 28:12 speaks of a ladder that has "angels ascending and descending..." It sounds more like paired escalators in a shopping mall. And it presumes that good things are up. Always up.

Up to heaven. Up to the penthouse suite. Up the salary scale. Up the list of officers, until you achieve president, chairperson, or five-star general.

I don't believe that any more. I may have, once. But I'm older now, and I don't have any ladders to climb.

At a youth event -- back when I could still participate in those things -- the leadership team refused to sing "We are climbing Jacob's ladder" with its upwards mindset: "every run goes higher, higher..." We changed the words: "We are dancing Sarah's circle..."

The symbol of the cross, I remind myself, has one arm pointing up, but the other end firmly grounded in the earth. And it has two horizontal arms pointing out, reaching out to enfold and embrace.

In the time I have left, I don't want to waste any of it climbing ladders. I'm not interested in going up. I want to do more reaching out, more enfolding and embracing.

And after that time runs out? The only thing I'm sure of is that it doesn't involve going up. On a spherical earth, which way is up, anyway?

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YOUR TURN

The mental exercise of thinking of an inferior god seemed to appeal to a number of you.

Steve Lawson wrote, "Anytime we can make the Christmas story more human in its reality so that we might understand ourselves and the truth in all of humanity and still feel a sense of the divine, holy nature of the world we live in - the better the story tells itself."

Ralph Milton quoted hymnwriter Brian Wren:

"When God is a child, there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first, and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid."

Dale (no last name given on his/her e-mail): "Thank you for this simple yet powerful insight. Belief in God should not become some force to mask or cover up human insecurity. Humans seem to crave power and control -- God apparently desires humility and gentleness. My prayer for this Christmas season is that the gentle Christ will be made anew within our lives."

Steve Roney, on the other hand, called the idea of an inferior god "theologically nonsensical. God is, by definition, 'the supreme being.' Accordingly, there cannot be more than one God, much less inferior and superior Gods. It also necessarily follows that all monotheistic religions worship the same God. There can therefore be no possible argument over 'whose God is better'."

Steve also challenged my description of the nativity stories as improbable: "Quite simply, if God exists, nothing is intrinsically improbable. He is free to do what he wants."

George Brigham also had some hesitations: "While I concur with overall tenor of this week's Soft Edges, I was somewhat surprised by the initial assumption. I have long supposed that if, as I believe, there is only one God then other religions must also believe in the same God. It may be, for example, that Christianity embraces (say) 75% of the whole truth, whilst Islam (say) only has 50% but that still leaves open the possibility of Islam understanding truths that elude Christians. Polytheists may believe in many gods but this is perhaps a way of grappling with the complexity of God in a different way to the 'simplicity' of merely believing in Trinity.

"I appreciate, of course, that many with a conservative theology would not agree with any of this, and that can lead them to dangerous assumptions. I have prayed from time-to-time, 'Lord save us from fundamentalists -- Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, et al.'"

On the subject of the nativity, Cliff Boldt mused, "I note the increase in my Facebook friends who sing the praises of Solstice. They are trying to cover up Christmas, show that they don't believe in that religious stuff. I haven't had a direct chat with any of them, face to face, but I want to ask: 'How come you go to such lengths to put down this Christian celebration of Christmas?'"

"Agnostics and atheists want to show that they haven't been 'conned' by the Christian religion? Good people all, who practice much of what Christ taught.

“A pastor friend of mine once said, ‘Everything in the Bible is true. And some of it even happened.’
“Isn't it good that we are all different?”

Frank Martens would count himself among those atheists: “I am, however, a believer in Nature ... because if it wasn't for Nature and how it has provided for us and continues to do so [while] we take the ‘Word’ literally and try to dominate it, and then because of our stupidity and greed, we screw ourselves”

Laurina Tallman based her letter on last week's psalm paraphrase: “I was talking to our youngest son, who made a Christ-like decision without having the sort of prayer life that helps one to make most decisions according to the teachings of Jesus. He has been dreadfully wounded and is struggling...

“He said he thinks there is no personal God -- that reality simply is unfurling and that you have to deal with it as best you can -- that there is no Divine plan for the individual life. My reply was that when you are faced with several alternatives and you pray about them, you reach a point where a Voice or an Awareness of something that feels like it is coming to you from outside of yourself tells you which of those alternatives is the better one to choose. If you keep making choices that way, taking the time to reach for something beyond the best that your intellect can generate, you find yourself being led towards acts and results that are uniquely fulfilling and that mesh with the choreographed ‘Dance of Life’ in today's paraphrased psalm. In other words, you begin to find purpose that meshes with other aspects of the world in a profoundly satisfying way. People study the life of Jesus because He did that exceptionally well even when the decisions were difficult and led to terrible suffering.

“Our son is awakening to his ability to ‘hear God.’ No one will have to teach him about the humility of Jesus because his path through the legal and penal system is rich in humiliating procedures... His need is for a God who has done better than he has, in similar circumstances. Jesus is both humble and superior; the ordinary man who is also a guide, example, and teacher. One who has suffered yet has overcome the natural human tendency towards bitterness and unforgiveness.

“And he said to me, ‘I hear you.’”

James Russell responded to Elaine Powell's essay on getting rid of food banks: “I have yet to see how making things worse for the worst-off is ever good for them. Yet there are always people advocating 'on their behalf'. Really? The poor, under-educated, over-stressed, and unorganized would suddenly find time, energy, and resources to plan, train for, and implement radical social change if they and their children just had LESS to eat?

“More likely, the advocates think their only chance to gain positions of power is to maneuver the plebs into a rebellion led by those advocates... All the risk for the worst-off; all the gain for the commissars. Real advocates for social change should expose these rats at every turn.”

Also following up on last week's letters, Marilyn Stone wrote from her winter escape to Florida, “George Brigham's friend might need to be careful about misleading a phone caller with his questions about methods of committing suicide. The caller might think he's serious and send the local police to his door! I know a young man who was able to keep a young woman on the phone, while his friend used another phone to call the authorities in her city and send help.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The psalm recommended for Epiphany Sunday is 72:1-7, 10-14. I used this paraphrase last year, but it still seems appropriate. I can imagine Mary crooning something like this to her baby, after the visit of the Magi.

1 Life will be different for you, my child.
2 You will break out of our prisons of oppression, our ghettos of injustice.
3 Your mountains will rise clear in the morning, and your valleys offer cozy comfort in the setting sun.
4 You will not fall prey to prevailing values;
you will never exploit the powerless, or profit from people's desperation.
5 Adversity will not grind you down,
6 nor will difficulties dissolve your determination.
They will only help you grow.
7 Everyone who meets you will see something special about you.
A bubble of peace will protect you;
10 A sea of calm will support you.
They will all see it in you, my child;
everyone will see it.
12, 14 You will do better than us. You will not be bowed down by despair, nor bent by hate.
You will not be crushed by violence; you will not grovel after power.
13 You will be free to love, to care, to have compassion.
14 You are precious, my child.
For you, things will be different.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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