

## THE RESOLUTIONARY WAR

Texts on Sunday, January 3, 2010

*Matthew 2: 1-12*

It's the first Sunday of a new year. Ah! The clean, fresh air! We seem more willing to trust this date—oh-one/oh-one!—to bring new energy to life than Christmas or any other. Our promises feel serious, the goals worthwhile, and how great to do something about them. But chagrin shadows our smile. We remember past resolutions, put on a shelf like broken Christmas toys. We meant to find the glue to fix them up to try again. We remember. But *this* January will be different!

We have our explanations for why our resolutions fail, but they don't go very deep. The real reason we fail has to do with a strange fact our culture hates to think about: Each of us is not just one person; we contain several people. When you have tumbled into some old habit, and then regain your balance, haven't you sometimes said "I hate it when I do that"? Listen to yourself: There are two "I's" in that declaration. Let me introduce you: In this corner, weighing in at 230 lbs, the reigning champion "I . . . Dothat." And in this corner, returning for his sixty-third rematch this year, at 97 lbs, the challenger "I . . . Hateitwhenidothat." When it comes to your change and growth, there are at least two I's in the ring all the time, and no referee. Here is a well-known passage from the letter of the apostle Paul to the church at Rome. Watch my hand: up and down are two different selves.

I do not understand *my* own actions. For i do not do what I want, but i do the very thing I hate. Now if i do what I do not want ... it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within *me*. For... I can will what is right, but i cannot do it, for i do not do the good I want, but the evil I do *not* want is what i do. (Romans 7:15-19)

Sounds like two cats in there. Now, suppose you have made a resolution to get more exercise; or to worry less; or to sing more . . . What happens? You make the promise to yourself—but which self? Can January Self who wants to shed five pounds outvote February Self who's got the couch and the kitchen all to her self? I read somewhere that athletic clubs make the lion's share of their profits off the deposits of hapless January selves who get outvoted by bigger people within a few weeks. Now, January self is not dead, come February; you can hear her crying in her room sometimes. But she has company. You are not one person.

We are touching down in the vital realm. Deep passageways to joy are here, but hard to find and follow. To discern your many selves, the more freely to choose which shall act—this is spiritual life, fundamentally. People use the word *spiritual* to mean a lot of different things, but all *spiritual* experiences, whether at the theater or in a church or in bed, share in the mystery of sensing the connection between different aspects of self, higher and lower, inner and outer, or as *Ephesians* has it, "to put away your . . . old self . . . and clothe yourselves with the new self." (Eph 4:22-24) The banality of new year resolutions and the tiresome resolutionary wars that follow have mostly to do with our not getting real about the multitude of our selves and the mystery and difficulty of intending to grow and of actually changing.

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Up above my head, Dorothy Turmail's beautiful banner sings to you from beyond the star: "Follow!" Here is the very theme we are striking this morning. Follow! How great and how hard it is to go and change! You may think the bright idea in your new resolution no match for the brilliant star in the story over Bethlehem—but don't sell this little light of thine cheap. Just like those wise men, you want to follow a path toward a light. This story can clear away all the ordinary confusion surrounding your desire. Every yearning to connect higher with lower, inner with outer, spirit with flesh— from stopping

smoking to bridling your angry tongue to taking more time to love and more for God—every such yearning is a braid in the golden cord we behold in this ancient legend of the star followed by wise men till it stands where the highest self is found in the flesh, vulnerable, in the lowest place.

This is what your yearning is about. But there is more here. Unlike most of us who soldier on in the revolutionary war, the magi don't go alone. They don't try to follow by themselves. They don't just pray to God for strength. They make their promise to one another. They go together. After all, *they* are wise. This small church of three, following a star, presents a figure for the Christian church as a spiritual community—a community who understand that our main purpose is not first to worship but first to help humans into the mystery of growth and change by following the way of the Cross, that star in which high and low eternally touch. If worship is made the main purpose of the church, with no path and no seriousness about taking that path with others-to-guide, encourage, and correct us, well, that sounds like the way of the lonely king Herod. Remember? He tells *others* to go in search of the highest self, the child. Then, says he, when you have found him bring me word, that I too may go to church there.

Let us not be deceived about ourselves. Herod is our ego, which pretends to control, and which is often able to destroy with a word what threatens our systems of comfort and belief. Our inner Herod knows very well how to use religion and worship to box God out and avoid growth and change. Making resolutions is part of our Herod's game, for it looks good— but the self-system which fears the touch from above knows that nothing is really at stake. The lawlessness of many selves' desires will still rule.

Wise men and women walk a different way. They study together, they wonder together, they challenge and guide together, they worship together, and dream some dreams together— even dreams that warn them of the inner Herod lurking within them, plotting to destroy their intention. Wise ones discern how to go home together by a different way.

For a long, long time, the Christian church has misled itself into paths of solo hopes and prayers—its hundreds, then its dozens, assembled weekly, yes, but solo mostly, not knowing or growing or going together, as wise men do, the way of the Cross, the undimmed star. You know it from school, some of you know it from therapy or from spiritual direction or theatrical direction: real growth and change happens in the hothouse of grace where another human cares for and corrects your path. Why? Because real change waits for one thing only, *sustained awareness*—and our many selves, which constantly interrupt awareness, need help—God's human help—to return effectively to our chosen path. Solo spirituality, by contrast, is not serious.

My counsel? Declare unconditional surrender in your revolutionary war. Drop all feeble, private resolutions. Don't go back to Herod. Don't make your soul go solo. Rather, join God's church as a wise man, a wise woman. Accept the reality of your ungoverned multitude within, and bring them all into serious spiritual conversation with other wise people here about how you have seen a star, and how your feet both find and fail to follow your path. This is what God's church is for.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*First Presbyterian Church  
Brooklyn, New York*

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