

## **So, what's new? (1)**

Rev. Lisa Doege

Jan. 9, 2011

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

---

Marketers, advertisers, spin doctors offer one reply, promising that everything is new. New and improved. Faster, slimmer, lighter, smaller, bigger, brighter, more fuel efficient, simpler, more powerful--and each one's product or candidate or client is newest and best of all. Their highest possible accolade is "it's/he's/she's unlike anything you've ever seen before!"

The ancient preacher offers the opposite reply, warning: vanity of vanities, there is nothing new under the sun.

We live much of our lives in between those two extremes. Day follows night. Years melt one into the next. Occasionally events, experiences, relationships break into the routine, turning it all upside down, replacing familiar with new and unknown: love can have that effect, or a baby, sobriety or a change in jobs. A new religious community or eye-opening philosophy might change everything, or a stint in the armed forces, particularly in time of war, or a life-altering diagnosis, or a natural disaster or act of terrorism. But mostly, it seems, we discover that suddenly we've slipped from young adulthood to mid-life without any fanfare. For all the promises of stronger, faster, better, newer, life pretty much goes unremarkably on. All the truly revolutionary advances in technology that have been less than a generation or two in the making are pretty much balanced out by birth and death, courtship and marriage, friendships and careers--rhythms of life largely unchanged from generation to generation--shorter or longer, faster or slow cycles, perhaps, but the patterns remain.

Newer, bigger, stronger, faster. Nothing new under the sun. And in between a young, bright Congresswoman, a dedicated public servant is targeted by a gunman with unknown motives. The Congresswoman is gravely injured. A judge, a child and several others are killed. Dozens are injured. The nation is stunned. New and improved? Or nothing new under the sun?

One day quite recently I was driving along in my car listening with part of my brain to a news story about a Pakistani governor who had been assassinated by one of his own body guards. The shooter, described as an Islamic extremist, was absolutely unrepentant, declaring that the governor's more moderate views made him a blasphemer. In another part of my brain I was noticing similarities between that incident and the assassination of Gandhi. And yet another part of my brain was despairing over

the dangers men and women must place themselves in, in so many parts of the world, if they want to be public servants, government officials, politicians. That third part of my brain betrayed my American naivety--something I should have grown out of long ago.

I was seventeen years old when I stepped off a plane in the Frankfurt airport, in the former West Germany, and spotted uniformed soldiers carrying machine guns. It was almost twenty years before 9/11. There had been, to my knowledge, no recent acts or threats of terrorism. Though surprised by the sight, I had both the formal education and the informal family-based grounding in current affairs needed to understand without having to ask why they were there.

Other aspects of my adventure soon crowded out that sight: the shock of being surrounded by the Germany language and the paradoxical shame that came with the realization that absolutely everyone I encountered would rather speak to me in English than struggle to understand my poor German; the romance of walled cities, the hushed horror and reverence of Dachau, the challenges of traveling on a bus with dozens of fellow adolescents almost all of whom were more enchanted by the prospect of drinking legally than was I; the extravagance of Crazy Ludwig's Castle and on and on. It was only in retrospect that I came to realize that the armed soldiers in the airport were the most significant difference between life in the US and life in West Germany I saw on that trip.

Those machine guns spoke of daily life in a land divided, of existence on a continent full of nations and states and principalities, crowded with languages and cultures and political systems in uneasy co-existence nearly forty years after the end of the war. Back home we were still decades away from needing passports to travel between the US and Canada or Mexico. And with the exception of Pearl Harbor, generations removed from any experience of war on domestic soil. As has been said many times in the past decade, the United States of my young adulthood enjoyed a willfully blind innocence. No machine guns in our airports because that sort of thing didn't happen here.

Until it did. There were little cracks along the way, but it was 9/11 that shattered our sense of innocence and invulnerability and universal popularity. Nothing, we have come to chant endlessly, has been the same since that bright Tuesday morning. We live in a whole new, post-9/11 world--and it's not bigger or brighter or better. It is in most ways more frightening, more uncertain, less innocent and a lot more inconvenient. It was the end, we say, of America's prolonged childhood and adolescence. We came of age that morning, we say, faced with the reality that age-old hatreds can flare at any

moment, that melting pots can boil over, that not everyone loves the golden child or longs to sit at the popular crowd's lunch table.

But how easily we forget--or deny--those lessons! If we had truly learned, almost a decade ago, that we are of the world, not a part from it, we would not be as surprised as we are at the events in Tucson yesterday. I don't mean to suggest that citizens of other countries, where such horrors take place more regularly, are inured to them, or that we should become resigned to them ourselves. But as long as we allow the pain, the hatred, the anger, the greed, and despair of the world to take us by surprise, we place ourselves in the way of dangers both internal and external.

Lucille Clifton's poem, *running into a new year*, though often read in January, has always seemed to me more of a birthday poem than a New Year's poem, with its references to earlier ages. I've been playing, these past few hours, with the idea that countries, civilizations, communities, don't age regularly on the anniversaries of their foundings--the fourth of July, for example--but rather mature irregularly as significant events come to pass. The ratification of the constitution, the civil war, women's suffrage, Brown vs. the Board of Education, the assassinations of the sixties, Roe v. Wade, Watergate, 9/11. At those moments we run--willingly or compelled--into a new year, with earlier ages tangled in our hair.

Yesterday's shooting might be another birthday. Will we run into the new year begging what we love and leave behind to forgive us? And what must we leave behind as we run?

There was a flurry of discussion among my colleagues on Facebook yesterday about what we would say this morning to people filling our pews looking to us to make sense of tragedy in Arizona. I can't make sense of it. I'm neither a historian nor a political scientist with explanations for the past. And I'm not an oracle with visions of the future. And I have never believed that tragedy "happens for a reason" or that meaning can be found in suffering.

But I do believe we have a choice in our response to such events and that meaning can be found in our choices. And as a person of faith, a person whose faith is in many ways distinctly American, I believe the response we are called to live in the coming days and weeks and years is love, generosity and a clear eyed resolution to be who we are.

When we are attacked - from within or from beyond - for being who we are, our response must be to become even more deeply, more genuinely, more consistently who we are, at our very best. When hated for diversity, for generosity, for tolerance, for

welcoming the stranger, for engaging difficult, nuanced discussions rather than quick and overly simple answers, we must become more diverse, more generous, more tolerant, more welcoming, more resistant than ever to false black/white, good/evil dichotomies. Anything less is surrender. Anything less, any move away from our values and principles amounts to admitting they were as flawed as our foes insist.

We have some things tangled in our hair on this unwelcome birthday--visions of ourselves as innocent, homogeneous, well-loved, infallible, safe and separate. These bits of national identity are hard to let go. But now is the time. Janus, the Roman god of doorways, beginnings and transitions who gives his name to this month, looks forward and back. We can learn from looking back but are called only to move forward.

Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE. I mention him only because he comes most readily to mind and easily reinforces the argument that nothing new happened in Tucson yesterday. The good news here is that our response, at every level from the personal to the national, can be just as worn and well used as the act of violence itself and yet, and yet, shine as though it were newly minted. Right shines. Delaying judgment without facts shines. Courage shines. Love shines. Unity in sorrow and unity in resolve shine.

Let us embrace the moment set before us, until we can answer, "What's new? There is nothing new under the sun. Yet our hearts are new. Our compassion is renewed. Our love of community and country and neighbor and stranger are new. Bigger, deeper, faster, stronger, ever-lasting. Unlike anything you've ever seen before." Amen.