January 2022

I remember being young(er) and watching TV. In one of the sci-fi movies, they talked about the year 2025 as some futuristic time because it seemed so far off. While I know that we’re still a few years shy of that date, coming into 2022 just brought this back to my attention – that the future that seemed so far away 40 years ago is now upon us.

I also appreciate this changing of the calendar. January takes its name from the Roman god, Janus, who had two faces – one looking forward and one looking back. This always seems like an apt appraisal of this time as we reflect back on the prior year as well as anticipate what might be coming in the new year. January is a month of holding tensions and of dual consciousness.

And hold tensions we must. We are entering our 3rd year of COVID with Omicron cases surging locally and nationally. People are sick and tired (literally) and you can feel a collective exhaustion just about everywhere. If these guidelines were able to be a bit more interactive, I would spend the entire time having people check in with each other about how they are doing. I find that even people who are doing relatively well these days are carrying much uncertainty and stress in their bodies. We are all living through a very unique time in history – in so many ways.

About a week ago, I had a chance to get away for a few nights with my family – into the woods and near a lake. It was a wonderful refuge. During our time together, we watched “Don’t Look Up” the new film (available on Netflix) starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence (among many other stars) and directed by Andy McKay. The premise of the film is that two astronomers in Michigan “discover’ a huge comet headed straight towards the earth and set out to warn the world of the coming disaster. The film is a satire as the pair finds that the President of the United States right on down to the average citizen doesn’t much want to hear about it, and the film speaks to the deep political divisions that we find ourselves in these days. I don’t want to give too much away in case you haven’t seen it, but the film is both a story and an obvious metaphor.

While the film is not perfect, it drives home the point about our collective inability or lack of urgency to address something that has the power to alter life as we know it. And while the film is speaking directly to the urgency of the climate crisis, it could be speaking to multiple issues that beg for our attention these days – all of which have the power to negatively alter life as we know it. And in each of our individual lives, I am guessing that we might have similar physical/psychological/emotional threats that we may not be facing with the proper urgency.

Jesus might have something to say about all this as well. And that’s what we’ll focus on in these reflections.

If you want to write and tell me how you are doing, I’d always love to hear. And as is the usual request, if you have any topics or ideas for future reflections, please send them my way.

Blessings,

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**I. Fire-Starter Questions**

1. What, in your opinion, is the most urgent social issue before us today (locally, in the United States or globally)? Do you see an appropriate/corresponding response to that issue? If yes, how do you suppose people are responding? If no, how do you suppose people are not responding?

2. Have you ever witnessed someone delaying a response to a serious problem? What happened?

**II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection**

**Matthew 11: 15 – 19**

*Jesus said, “To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who sit in marketplaces and call to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, ‘He is possessed by a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, ‘Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is vindicated by her works.”*

**Mark 1: 14 – 20**

*After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.”*

*Passing along the beach of Lake Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew net-fishing. Jesus said to them, “Come with me...” They didn’t ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed.*

*A dozen yards or so down the beach, he saw the brothers James and John, Zebedee’s sons. They were in the boat, mending their fishnets. Right off, he made the same offer. Immediately, they left their father Zebedee, the boat, and the hired hands, and followed.*

**Matthew 16: 2 – 4**

*He told them, “You have a saying that goes, ‘Red sky at night, sailor’s delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.’ You find it easy enough to forecast the weather—why can’t you read the signs of the times?*

**2 Timothy 3: 1 – 5**

*Don’t be naive. There are difficult times ahead. As the end approaches, people are going to be self-absorbed, money-hungry, self-promoting, stuck-up, profane, contemptuous of parents, crude, coarse, dog-eat-dog, unbending, slanderers, impulsively wild, savage, cynical, treacherous, ruthless, bloated windbags, addicted to lust, and allergic to God…Stay clear of these people.*

**III. Some Questions for Reflection**

1. How do you understand this first passage? If I added that it likely is a passage about how fickle people are, would that change how you understand it?

2. In Mark’s gospel, what do you notice about the response of the first disciples? How does that sit with you? How do you think Jesus got them to say yes so compellingly?

3. What gets in the way of our reading the ‘signs of the times’? Is it as easy as it sounds?

4. What does the reading from Timothy bring up in you? What does it get you thinking about?

**IV. Commentary**

One of the very funny satirical elements of the movie, “Don’t Look Up,” centered around the discovery of this comet that was headed towards earth. Even as the comet was visible, a counter campaign called “Don’t Look Up” emerged (where the title of the movie comes from) where people were encouraged not to believe what the science and their own experience was telling them!

Of course, the movie and its premise were meant to provoke conversation.

As I mentioned in the introduction, one could argue that there are quite a few “comets” headed towards the earth right now in the form of major social issues – climate change being only one of them. And the reality is that they are already here. It’s not some distant reality.

With all of these, but especially with something like climate change, the response of a lot of people has been meh.

I’ll suggest a few reasons why I think this might be the case:

1) No doubt, issues have been politicized and polarized, and, depending on where you get your news from you will get VERY different versions of what is happening in the world around you. There are those who deny that specific things are even happening, and some people are actively engaged in disinformation campaigns meant to confuse and distract people. We’re seeing this even at the highest levels of government, and we’re living in an age when there is not even agreement on what facts are. These are surely strange times.

2) I also think about what the psychologists name as our inability to respond to “slow threat.” In terms of human physiology, our brains seem well wired to address what are perceived as immediate threats. Slower threats, however, do not register in the same way, and humans are incredibly adaptable creatures (as are most creatures), even adapting to toxic conditions.

3) Urgent and Important. Some of you may have seen the work of Steven Covey (and others) that explores how we manage the “urgent” and “important” in our everyday lives. Much of our energy often gets sucked into addressing the things that seem urgent – leaving some of what is really important (and will one day become urgent) off to the side or on the margins of our lives. We see this with relationships, for example, where we prioritize certain people, say, due to work commitments yet we do not have time for some of the people who are most meaningful to us (friends and family). Many of us struggle with how to manage the urgent and important things in our lives.

4) Apathy/Disconnection/Fatigue. I know that for many today, we just don’t have the “bandwidth” to take in one more urgent crisis that we need to respond to somehow. Period. Our nervous systems seem overwhelmed and we likely are in a freeze/numb mode. While self-protective, it’s not a good response. Moreover, I know I see it in myself and in others that so many of the injustices and social situations have become “normalized” around us. These just seem to be the way the world is, and, thus, I do not feel too compelled to address things.

No doubt there are a lot of reasons that contribute to what we give our time and attention to and what we don’t feel much urgency about.

I have also been thinking a lot about Martin Luther King, Jr. lately. His phrase, “the fierce urgency of now” was used in a few of his speeches. He used it to refer to the need to address civil rights, economic justice and freedom - not just for Black people – but for all people in his country and around the world. But his urgency came from being in and close to the Black freedom struggles. He had heard the cries of his people for too long.

In a 1965 address in Selma, he said, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. ... We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words 'too late.''

These words have haunted me as has the phrase “the fierce urgency of now.”

It just gets me thinking about what gets priority in our lives and what gets our urgency.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the scriptures we consider in this reflection, we hear Jesus’ frustration because the people’s response to what was going on in their midst seemed petty. Something really important was happening, and they were just stuck in their own feelings and did nothing.

The “call” stories of the first disciples reflect what happens when we have an urgency in our lives to give ourselves to something.

And Jesus’ words about being able to read “the signs of the times” raises questions about how we interpret what is going on in the world around us. He seemed stunned that people could not see what was happening right in their midst. No doubt we witness this all around us today – especially in this country.

In my own life I keep returning to a quote from the Senegalese forestry engineer, Baba Dioum, who said that, “In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.”

I might slightly paraphrase this to read, “*That which* *has urgency and importance in our lives is tied to what we love and have come to understand.”*

Just sit with that for a moment.

Urgency is tied to love.

Now I am not saying that because you have not quit whatever you are doing and aren’t out protesting against climate change that you do not “love” the earth or God. But I would submit that you and I have been groomed to disconnect so that we don’t feel much of anything these days. In order to recover an urgency (that I think may be required of us), our ability to feel love and connectedness will need to be recovered.

Richard Rohr, OFM, often speaks of the need to say, “No,” so that we can say a deeper, “Yes,” to something else. I think of people who exhibit great passion and urgency for a cause and the many “no’s” they must say in order to say such a deep “yes” to something else. In my experience, when we take something up urgently – especially when it is fed from a place of love – there is an aliveness that emerges in us. People who say yes at that level (like Jesus and MLK) seem to have an infectious quality to them. They awaken something in us as well and we catch their urgency.

I invite you to think about something that is important to you that you would like to make more “urgent” in your life – something that you would like to become a little more single-minded about (within yourself and/or with others). Then consider the following:

*What is the love that you have that might fuel that urgency? Reflect on a story that would tell someone about that love.*

*What would you want others to understand more deeply so that they might join you in that urgency?*

*What must be taught?*

Correspondingly, we might also ask ourselves, “What is someone else doing/saying that might need my urgency?” We might then reflect on:

*How would I learn more about the love that fuels that person’s urgency?*

*What might I need to understand more deeply so that I can join them?*

*What do I need to learn?*

Imagine if we all took something up with slightly more vigor…

A few last thoughts on this.

I was recently in a training with a mentor and friend of mine named Vikki Reynolds. She’s a therapist, activist and teacher working and witnessing on the lower east-side of Vancouver, BC. Vikki often speaks of working on “anti-perfection” projects. Simply put, so many of us have been taught to believe that if we can’t do it perfectly, we can’t do it at all. If we don’t have it all figured out, don’t bother.

During the pandemic, she says, so many people in so many arenas have needed to figure things out as we go and that we will never do things perfectly – nor should we hold each other to that standard. I’d offer some similar thinking to what I am talking about here. Lean in to an urgency, and hold on to the idea that you will figure it out as you go. Life is messy and imperfect – especially the faith life – and so trying anything is going to involve its share of disorder.

In her work as a clinical supervisor to teams doing a lot of harm reduction work, Vikki often asks a question of herself which I just love. She asks, “What is the best use of me?” I love this because it helps me get to that urgent/important tension. And if we can find the best use of ourselves on a more regular basis (keeping in mind the anti-perfection commitment), my guess is that we will feel more invigorated and connected as we move forward and less guilty that we’re not doing something else. Naturally, other people can be great resources to help us discern the best use of ourselves. This is not meant to be yet another privatized process.

In my analysis, there will always be tensions that we must hold and bear related to what is in front of us, what we take up urgently, what holds the greatest importance for us, how we use our limited time/energy/resources, etc. Whether we give ourselves to climate activism, anti-racism work, addressing homelessness, child welfare work, animal rights, refugee work, care work, volunteering somehow, etc. (and the list goes on and on), perhaps we can aspire to give ourselves more fully to it and see the critical connections between that work and all of the other urgent needs in our world. That is the response Jesus seeks – a not holding back response that addresses to what is in our midst.

And whatever we do, maybe we keep in mind the words of the great John Wesley who said,

“Do all the good you can,

By all the means you can,

In all the ways you can,

In all the places you can,

At all the times you can,

To all the people you can,

As long as ever you can.”

And may we do it before it is “too late.”

**V. Action Step**

One action I will take after reading these guidelines is…

1. I am also well aware that one of the characteristics of what Tema Okun labeled “white supremacy culture” is a sense of urgency. Oftentimes whiteness moves very quickly and feels like everything has to happen now – ignoring the dynamics of power and how it operates or disregarding deep time held by many older cultures. The urgency I am speaking of here is different from that. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)