

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
January 13, 2013

Keep Fresh our High Resolve

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Do not fear, for I am with you. ~ Isaiah 43: 2&5

Not long after today's University Public Worship, I will make my way across campus to Maples Pavilion to watch the Stanford women's basketball team compete against our east bay archrival, Cal. The place will be packed no doubt; the Stanford Band and Tree creating a unique expression of ritual and even our fans will be cautiously raucous. It reminds me about the same pilgrimage I made across campus to Maples a couple of seasons back, arriving a few minutes late with the game well underway. Having had no time to change, and still wearing my clergy collar, I slid onto a bleacher seat near the floor. Out of the corner of my eye to the left, I recognized a familiar silhouette. I turned and discovered I was sitting right next to Santa Claus. All the images of the season I thought, as it was just before Christmas then. How nice that Santa and the priest are here to cheer for our favorite team. The possibilities of this time of year I imagined. I love to dwell in the vastness of possibilities, not only through and now beyond the Christmas season, but especially now as we are 13 days into a brand new year. Day 13, 2013. Imagine that.

What might be possible in this year? How might our horizons be broadened, our faith deepened, our lives strengthened? How might we ourselves be challenged and our perspectives and expectations along with it? How and what will we resolve to change, improve, or establish in our lives in this New Year?

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Our opening prayer today comes from the pen of Howard Thurman, the first African American to serve as Dean of a Chapel in a predominantly white institution of higher education, Boston University. I find it especially meaningful this time of year: “Keep fresh before us the moments of our high resolve, that in good times or in tempests, we may not forget that to which our lives are committed. Keep fresh before us the moments of our high resolve.”

Full disclosure here. I am not one that is big on making resolutions, but I do find the rhythms of the calendar both re-invigorating and re-freshening to a great extent.

As the famed Broadway production *Rent* asked: “525, 600 minutes – how do you measure a year?” This question gives me great pause because this time of year is always a segue into a conversation about calendars and the power in fact we tend to delegate to them. With this in mind, it has caused me to ask how will I in fact measure the 525,600 minutes that the new year has allotted in a way that might allow me to move through it, as one writer put it, minute by minute with grace, ease, joy, faith and whatever else it is that would culminate as a life worth living?

The journey of our lives seems to be guided by a map we create ourselves called a calendar. “It’s a map”, writes Dennis Merritt Jones, composed of invisible seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months which do not yet exist, culminating in the timespan we call a year, which to some degree charts out our destiny long before we arrive at any given point. Destiny and destination are derived from the same root word, *destine* which comes from the Latin word *destinare* meaning to establish or determine. In other words, what you place on your calendar determines your future – you are establishing the rhythm and

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route your life will follow for the year ahead.” Merritt Jones argues that doing this deliberately, or mindfully as he puts it, is a mark of true wisdom. He writes: “Many people’s lives are complemented and enhanced by the conscious use of a calendar – others are run and ruined by their unconscious use of a calendar.”

I’m sure many of us, including me, have been busy filling in the calendar with commitments, things to do, places to go, people to see. And in this age of technology, we all have computers and applications that automatically fill in repeating events not only for this year, but many successive years to come. Dennis Merritt Jones insights have none the less struck a chord and resolved for me to do at least this: before putting anything new on the calendar take a deep breath and consider the ebb and flow of the energy required to honor that commitment and allow myself to get real with the stress meter about what it will take as a result of saying yes to it. Or as Howard Thurman reminds us: *not forgetting that to which our lives are committed*. What really matters to us? What are we about? How will this year be any different than the last?

Speaking of calendars, what may also help us *not forget that to which we are committed*, let’s remember that the religious or specifically liturgical calendar is instructive, illuminating, as well as directive. In fact, we are now in what I consider the best, albeit the shortest season of the Christian calendar: Epiphany. It is the season in which the identity of Christ, his real identity, is made clearer and clearer to all who are willing to look and see. What began with the very private annunciation of an angel to Mary, then to Joseph, then made manifest to shepherds and animals at a manger – the Christmas narrative most of us are very familiar with – is now moving into an ever

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expanding audience of witnesses. Today's gospel of Luke contains the story of Jesus own baptism, and it is an epiphany story. It is where we come to see more of whom this Jesus was and perhaps begin to understand what he was about. "The epiphany business," wrote the late Peter Gomes, chaplain to Harvard University, "is like a stone that is dropped in the water, which sets off a series of concentric circles that get bigger and bigger.... and we are inevitably drawn into relationship with those circles. The Epiphany is that manifestation of God in the world where the message is greater than the proverbial manger and goes well beyond it." To leave it there, to pack it up as we did our crèche this past week and put it away for another year, is to miss the point of Epiphany entirely. It's why it is known as the season of light. Light shines on. It reveals. Continually. The expansion of work of the good news, the growing and widening recognition of who Jesus was now extends to include us, beyond a particular time and place. That means students, professors, urbanites and suburbanites, humanists, scientists, the old and the young, the rich and the poor. The ritual of Baptism is meant to suggest a renewal, a regenerating, and a calling back to the life we are meant to live. According to this gospel narrative in Luke, all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was "with all the people" which is unfortunately what much of Christianity has forgotten. Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity, of identification with a nation and people broken by the wear and tear of a selfish world, all of whom hoped for new beginnings, welcome, embrace, validation, justice and mercy through a return to the love of God.

One thing I do resolve to this New Year is not to take any contemporary expression of light, of identification, of manifestation, for granted. In fact, I want to continually be amazed by and reminded of its relevance, its example of

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high resolve. It was not lost on me as one among many deeply impacted by the announcement this week from Washington National Cathedral in our capital, where the nation gathers to mourn tragedies and celebrate new presidents, that it will soon begin hosting same gender marriages. It is a decision that carries huge symbolism, reported the Associated Press. The 106-year-old cathedral has long been a spiritual center for the nation, hosting presidential inaugural services and funerals for past presidents. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr delivered his last sermon there in 1968. It is highly visible, drawing thousands of visitors each year. It is also the seat of the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, the one in which I am ordained. The cathedral's decision is not surprising, given we are a denomination that has paid a price for its stance on LGBT people. To me, it is indeed an example of breaking down barriers, of being for all the people, of demonstrating that God's boundaries transcend ours. The Very Rev. Gary Hall, the cathedral's dean said: "I read the Bible as seriously as fundamentalists do. And my reading of the Bible leads me to want to do this because I think it's being faithful to the kind of community that Jesus would have us to be." He sees marriage as a human issue, not a political one. Human lives, all of the people, is very much what was central to the life, example and ministry of Christ. And it is clearly central to the identity that the National Cathedral claims both publicly and collectively as a community of faith.

The power of affirmation as revealed for human lives, all of the human family, in this contemporary example only strengthens identity and the ability to act from that secure identity. Further, we would be hard pressed to find anyone who would not welcome a declaration much like the one in today's account of Jesus' baptism: You are the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. As well, I found myself going back several times this week to the beautiful passage that

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Rachel read for us from the prophet Isaiah. *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth.* The prophet speaks here to a people bruised and beleaguered, previously judged for their arrogance but now gently and generously reminded that they now have a new and different identity: they are a people valued and honored by God.

Who am I? What makes me worthy? Where do I belong? What should I do with my life? These are persistent questions that I engage with and reflect on a regular basis with students here on campus. But in fact they are questions for all of us. Whether we ask them explicitly or subconsciously, most of us would agree that we often look for these answers in our roles, our work, our peer groups, our accomplishments, and our acquisitions. This past week I had a striking conversation with a returning student who had contacted me urgently, wanting to talk before the new quarter was to begin. Facing a big decision, it was clear that this student had spent a good part of the winter break, some down time, to deeply reflect and recover some of what they sensed they had lost since coming to Stanford— an understanding of the fullness and wholeness of their identity and the things that mattered most. What had begun to shape their time and calendar was not a reflection of that to which their life was truly committed, nor was it the full expression of this student's identity. This student wondered out loud why they had become so irritable and distant – it was not like them to do so. It is rare for me quite frankly to have these conversations with freshman. There's much to absorb here at Stanford and hard to self differentiate in the early going. More often these conversations happen with juniors and seniors who experience either a crisis of identity or a

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period of panic, as they are about to graduate, all of which are understandably normal. Needless to say, I was astonished at the level of not only self-awareness, but also the courage this student demonstrated. As a result, the next two quarters and those to come at Stanford will be no doubt be a reflection of those more deeply held convictions and passions.

Which brings me back to where we started. 525,600 minutes...how do you measure a year? Calendars, secular and religious beg the question: To whom and what are we identified? How do we determine that to which our lives are committed? What will we do for others? What light will be revealed?

In our post enlightenment, post modern world, descriptions like the ones we read and hear today in the scriptures may strike us as odd. "The heavens opening in Jesus' baptism," writes Lawrence Stratton in *The Christian Century*, "along with the rest of the biblical story, including the prophets, reveal what theologian Karl Barth called a strange new world. The story of faith, which the Scriptures declare, affirms that somehow the voice from heaven gets through our empirical limitations."

Calendars, secular and religious - if used thoughtfully, intentionally and carefully, I resolve can be important and transforming tools. We might just find ourselves paced with a rhythm that more authentically suits us and honors the measure of our days spiritually, mentally and physically. So many possibilities. It's a strange new world.

525,600 minutes....how will you measure your year?