

PAST PERFORMANCE, FUTURE RETURNS

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Philippians 3:4b-14

The pantheon of gods and goddesses of ancient Greece was a complex mythology. The Greeks worshiped dozens, if not hundreds, of immortal beings. Of these, we are most familiar with the Olympian gods such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Ares, Aphrodite, and others.

The Romans had their own pantheon which was largely adopted from the older Greek culture. The Roman gods included Jupiter and Juno, Minerva, Neptune, Venus, and others. There was, however, one god in the Roman pantheon that was wholly unique to Rome, and that was the god Janus. Janus was the god of beginnings and endings, the god of time. He was the god of transitions and movement which made him the god of doorways and gates and passages, things through which people travel. Because he was a god of time, Janus was depicted as having two faces—one looking forward and one looking backward, one looking to the future and one looking to the past. The backward-looking face is often shown as being older than the front-looking face.

Today is the first Sunday of January, the first Sunday of a new year. And you may be thinking that it is appropriate to talk about Janus at this time of transition, this doorway between an old year and a new one. This is the time that we are looking back at the past while simultaneously scanning the horizon curious about what the future holds for us. And you may be thinking about how canny those Romans were to recognize this shift in time by naming this first month January after the god Janus.

Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

For one thing, the Roman calendar did not begin each year with January. The Roman calendar started in March as did ancient Eastern calendars as an observance of the vernal equinox. Even stranger, originally, the Roman calendar contained only ten months (not twelve) beginning with March: Martius, Aprilis, Maius, Junius, Quintilis, Sextilis, September, October, November, and December. These ten months represented only 304 days. The remaining 61 days between December and March was nothing. It was this nebulous, unnamed, unnumbered period. It was the black hole of winter.

As I see it, this tells you just how much the Romans hated winter. They hated winter so much they couldn't even give it a name. I guess they were thinking, if we just ignore this time of the year then maybe it will go away. I know how they feel. Winter is not my favorite season. This week, in those few precious hours of light that we had, whenever I would look out the window and see nothing but gray and

rain I would simply respond by saying, “Oouhhh.” That’s what we do in the winter. “How’s the weather outside?” “Oouhhh.” “How do you feel?” “Oouhhh.” That’s was the Roman’s opinion. They hated winter. It was cold and gray and dark. If someone asked, “what comes after December?” all they could give you was, “Oouhhh.”

It is believed that in the sixth century BC, that the Roman king introduced February and January (in that order). Finally, we had a name for the non-space that was “Oouhhh.”

Eventually, the Roman calendar became such an unusable mess that in 45 BC Julius Caesar instituted a massive calendar reform. Following the reform, the month Quintilis was renamed Julius (or July). It was named for Julius Caesar because that was the month of his birth. Later¹, the month Sextilis was renamed Augustus after Caesar Augustus.

The Julian calendar is not the one we use today. We use the Gregorian calendar instituted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. In that calendar, the month of January was finally, officially established as the first month of the year.

Although the Romans didn’t intend it this way, as the first month on the calendar, January (named for the god Janus) is for us a time to mark transitions. It is a month of endings and beginnings. It is a time to look back as well as a time to look forward. It is in this time of the year that people create those lists of the superlatives of the previous year—the best books of 2018, the best films, the best songs, the best new gadgets that we can’t live without. These lists force us to look back but also encourage us to consider the question of what the new year will bring to us?

As we gather here in early January, it is fun to consider the future. However, as Christians, we have the added responsibility of considering our lives of faith.

As Christians, as we look forward we need to look with our eyes of faith.

If you are not sure what I mean, then I would suggest turning to the apostle Paul and his letter to the church in Philippi. The question is, do we live in the past, or do we choose to grow from it. Do we live with “what might have been” or do we strive for “what might be”? Looking to the past is not a terrible thing. As the Spanish philosopher George Santayana famously put it, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

The apostle Paul was well aware of his past and his earlier life. He had been an enthusiastic and energetic persecutor of the church. As a Jew, he had impeccable credentials—a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a righteous follower of

¹ 8 BC.

the Law. But then he had that transformative experience in which he came to know Christ. As he writes to the church in Philippi, *Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.* Just knowing Christ puts our lives into perspective. As Paul came to understand, righteousness does not emerge from a strict adherence to the Law; true righteousness *comes through faith in Christ.* Paul admits that he is not there yet, but he presses on to make it his own. As he write to the church, *this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

As Paul lived his new life in Christ, he discovered that he wasn't terribly fond of his previous life. He had actively persecuted Christians, chasing them from city to city. He used his education and intellect to bring harm to the followers of Christ. He stood by when Stephen was stoned to death. That was the past; that was his life in the rear-view mirror. As Paul writes to the Philippians, he prefers now to look forward pressing toward the goal of the heavenly call of God.

We are at the transition of a new year. Many wonderful things happened last year as well as many that we would rather forget. What will the new year bring? How will I be affected? How will my family fare? What effort can I put forth to improve my situation. But perhaps the biggest question we can ask is, where is God leading me? We can make all the plans we want, but unless we include God, it is nothing but folly. We have to look with the eyes of faith.

When we choose to look at the world with the eyes of faith, we will see the world differently. With eyes of faith, we become prophets, we will see vision, we will dream dreams. We will find that our lives are challenged to following God's call to mercy and justice.

Looking at the future with eyes of faith is not about our changing the world, it is about God changing us. The apostle Paul was certainly changed when he had a vision of Jesus. Subsequently, Paul gave his life in service to God.

So, today on the first Sunday of January, I'm asking that you look back at your life and also forward to the Lord. Amen.