



Head of Janus, Vatican Museum, Rome. By Loudon Dodd, own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7404342>.

It is conventionally thought that the month of January is named after the Roman god, Janus. Janus was the god of beginnings and endings, the deity who could simultaneously look backwards and look forwards—hence his month is January, the month on the cusp of the previous year and the start of the new year. Statues typically depicted Janus with two faces smashed together back to back, one looking that way and one looking that way, but none looking at you. None looking here and now.

It's been two thousand years since we Christian people stopped worshipping the Roman gods and goddesses, but I think we modern Christians surreptitiously

still adore Janus.

We are so good—too good—at ruminating on the past:
 thinking about what we could have done better,
 what we could have done differently,
 what we wish we could go back and change.

And if not dwelling on the past,
 we're thinking about the future:
 small items, like tasks we need to do,
 but also big dreams and daunting worries:
 What will become of our children or our parents?
 How will we meet the next bill?
 Will I overcome this sickness . . .
 have that new baby . . .
 find that new job . . .
 retire well . . . ?
 What's our next Big Move?

And surely, our constant-news cycle
 with pundits predicting each politician's next move,
 with weathermen and their ten-day forecasts,
 with recaps of "What You Missed"
 keeps us under a Janus-like spell:
 looking forward and looking back,
 but no sights set on *today*.

Long ago,
 the regular church-goers gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth
 were under the same spell
 on the Sabbath that Jesus came to guest preach.
 Some were likely thinking about the past:
 what they had done,
 what they had left undone,
 what they wished they hadn't done.
 And some were probably imagining the future:
 what they had to do,
 which uncertainty lay ahead,
 what may or may not come to fruition.

Perhaps only a few were thinking of that day,
excited to hear a hometown boy share God's Word with them.

Then Jesus gets up and picks THE passage
that is perhaps closest to his heart,
THE passage that sums up his relationship with and call from God.
Using the words of Isaiah, Jesus *first* talks about his past,
about what God has done for him:

"The Lord has anointed me . . . He has sent me."

Then Jesus says what that Spirit and God *will allow* him to do:
"to bring good news to the poor . . .
to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And then,
rolling up the scroll,
handing it back to the assisting minister,
and sitting down,
with *everyone* watching, enraptured,
Jesus says,
"*Today*, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today, the burden of the past and the uncertainty of the future are taken care of.

Today, the best effects of history and the promise of the future combine
and the result is freedom and recovery and favor.

To any of the listeners present, this should have been GOOD NEWS.

To those weighed down by the past or their sins,

Jesus says, "I'm here to bring release."

To those oppressed by injustice or blinded by uncertainty,

Jesus says, "I'm here to set you free."

To those who think God would never regard them or hardly favor them,

Jesus proclaims, "This is the year for you."

This is good news for them

but, as we'll see in next week's Gospel,

rather than delighting the people,

it angers them,

and their doubt and rage drive them to the point of violence.

The people strongly resist this Today-Jesus.
 Their persistent Janus-stare
 keeps them from accepting how God has fulfilled scripture in their hearing.

One side faces the past:
 they hold to their concept of Jesus-as-human.
 The little boy they saw grow up among them
 now says he can cure the sick and prosper the poor.
 Jesus tells them he's the Lord's own hotshot,
 but they can't get past the memory of him as Joseph's snotty-nosed boy.
 Their fixation on the past prevents them from seeing Jesus
 as the fulfillment of God's promises.

Another side faces the future, and it doesn't fare any better.
 Some in Jesus' home congregation
 have heard that he does great deeds;
 something special happened in Capernaum
 that they got wind of it (v. 23).
 They expect Jesus to be MORE than the hometown kid,
 and they want to see it for themselves.
 They expect him to do something extraordinary in their near future;
 but he hasn't done a miracle *for them yet*,
 and that's disappointing.

Here lie the pitfalls of their—and our—Janus-faces:
 fixating on the past,
 even what God has done for us in the past
 and who we know God to be from our past,
 or obsessing over the future,
 our expectations of God and hopes for what we want God to do,
 causing us to miss what God is doing TODAY.
 Blinding us to God's standing and preaching and working among us
 HERE and NOW.
 Keeping us from the God-given freedom and liberation *at hand*.

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This week, I had a small bite of this liberation, this freedom
on Wednesday, while literally working on this sermon.
As I was entering a local café to sit down and get writing,
I walked past the only other table of customers and saw a woman:
I know her, I thought . . . But from where?

Somehow it was from church, but she wasn't an LCOS member.
Then I remembered: it was Karen.
The owner of a restaurant nearby where I used to eat regularly
before it closed.

Karen would frequently come out and greet diners;
she eventually started to recognize me and Pastor Lisa from St. Luke's
whenever we'd eat there together or
when I'd bring church members there.
I remembered talking to Karen
after her husband and co-owner died young and suddenly;
she was very open about her grief,
and her struggle,
and also about her faith in God.

Seeing Karen on Wednesday pulled me into the past,
but then I suddenly remembered my next appointment;
I only had an hour to spare; I had to get working, be efficient.
I was living like Janus:
stuck with one face thinking about my old, intimate conversations with Karen,
and one face turned towards the demands of my near future.

But then, for some reason I cannot recall or explain
—thank you, Holy Spirit—
I left my drink and my bag at my table,
and I went over and re-introduced myself to Karen.
She remembered me and our conversations.
We started chatting.
She told me about closing the restaurant and finding a new calling
working with Alzheimer's patients
and how fulfilling and amazing she found that work;
how thankful she was to God for steering her there.
Karen and I found out we lived in nearby neighborhoods

and ate at this café frequently;
 she introduced me to her friend
 and we talked about the faltering local schools.

Concretely, no oppressed person left the conversation un-oppressed;
 no blind person walked away from our table with sight.
 But I did leave the conversation feeling free. Or free-er.
 The two directions of my future work-deadlines
 and the past memories of Karen’s restaurant
 having yielded, by the grace of God,
 to the presence of Christ in that moment.

It illustrated to me
 that if we only walk around with our Janus-faces turned back or forward
 then we risk missing what God is doing right here and now.
 We risk missing the people God is asking us to help and meet,
 or the people God is putting in our lives to help and meet us.
 We may overlook how God has grown people from children
 or from childish-ways
 or how a person or situation has fulfilled or surpassed our expectations.

When we can stop pushing ourselves in two directions
 —the one we can’t undo and the one we can’t predict—
 and walk the singular path of God’s work today,
 that is *liberation*.

When we let go of expectations for things we cannot control,
 when we or someone else grows so that the past *really is* past,
 when we forgive the jerk who hurt us,
 when we re-approach someone we’d written off,
 when, by the grace of God, we do the “hard thing”—
 that is leaning in to God’s reconciling, redeeming, re-creating work of today.
 That is liberation.

That is recovering our Janus-blinded sight
 to see that God has indeed fulfilled the promises of scripture
 in our hearing
 today.

AMEN.