

Has anybody made a new year resolution yet? Got some plans for 2022?

Is anyone else feeling like it's just inviting trouble if you make plans? It's *been* a time and it's being one all over again now, isn't it. I mean just take our in-person Christmas eve service as an example. I was looking forward to an in-person Christmas Eve service this year, after having to stay virtual in 2020. Things are not back to normal, but we've all been adapting.

About ten days before Christmas Eve, our music director Susan Peck gently brought to my attention the fact that the service outline I had shared was an exact duplicate of our last Christmas Eve before the pandemic. Complete with the same exact sermon title and congregational singing. It had no pandemic adaptations. I had uploaded it a month earlier to use as a template, and then forgotten to look at it again. At all. I vaguely thought I had done so. But apparently with all the transition happening in other areas, I made a subconscious decision that Christmas Eve would be a throwback to a more comfortable era. The year 2019.

Our brains are soooo interesting.

So, okay, we had to make some updates, including COVID precautions. If you attended the service, you heard a little bit of this story in my homily that night. We planned a service with a masked choir singing—for the first time since March of 2020—and then we'd all go outside with our candles to sing a couple of closing songs in the courtyard. With luminarias, even. Beautiful.

Then one of the musicians tested positive for COVID. This was the second worship leader to test positive in ten days, after 15 weeks of no positives on the whole worship team. That felt ominous. Omicron is here. New plan: No choir. Shorter service so we get outdoors faster. Got it.

We got a few requests to livestream that 7pm service, and I thought, why not. It's Christmas Eve. Let's try it. Well, the streaming platform we were going to use turned out not to work. We'd have to do it on Zoom. That means we'd need a Zoom DJ. So we recruited one. Sweet.

It also meant we'd also need an alternate ending, since the sanctuary camera can't travel outside for those closing songs. We developed an alternate ending, and trained the DJ. Done. Beautiful. Got it. Sweet.

Then I checked the weather report. It called for rain and 20 mph winds. Now we needed an alternate alternate ending, friends, one in which we'd stay in the sanctuary and the zoom people could stay connected with everyone else and we would not sing. For the love of Pete. Ok, I developed that, retrained the volunteers and zoom DJ, and rewrote the Christmas Eve script.

At 5pm on Christmas eve, I checked the weather again: clear skies and only a light breeze. Back to alternate ending #1. At 7pm I sat on the platform with our intern minister Matt, and as the service began, I checked the weather one more time. Now it said there was an 80% chance of rain, precisely when we would have gone outside, and at no other time the whole evening. I've been wondering when I'd use the phrase, "Not today, Satan!" in a sermon.

In the end, the folks in the sanctuary put on our coats and jingled on out to the courtyard, where we sang in a circle around the old cottonwood, luminarias at our feet, and the sky was gentle and calm. The folks on Zoom got to sing with the choir's specially made video, and light candles with one another in the video gallery.

We make plans and god laughs, yeah?

So what do you do? What should we do about 2022? Well, we adapt and we laugh with god.

Here's the secret to being able to do that: most of the big things worth setting our sights on—most of the things that truly matter— don't actually begin with plans at all. They begin with intention. An intention is something different than a plan. In fact, what we call plans, some might call "outentions." Because they are about outcomes. Outentions, or plans, might include taking a certain trip, changing our bodies in a certain way, exercising a certain amount, or meeting a certain kind of person.

Outentions:

- I want to go to Paris,
- Gain or lose a certain amount of weight—a big one in January, when diet culture is at its most maniacal, staging a relentless attack of advertising, or maybe your outention is to
- fall in love with a person who has a degree in bagpiping or puppet arts.
- Which are real degrees at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Connecticut, respectively. And I absolutely believe they are awesome degrees.

But consider the flexibility and deeper meaning of framing your goals this way:

- I want to feel adventurous and have new cultural experiences;
- I want to enjoy feeling connected, strong, and healthy in my body (whatever my body type);
- I want to meet interesting people who take music and, okay, sure puppets, seriously.

(I don't know what corresponds to puppets. Joy?)

When we separate out-tentions (outcomes) from in-tentions (deeper goals, values) things get both clearer and more flexible.

- If our intention is adventure and culture, there are many ways to live into that, even if our plans are somehow thwarted.

- If the intention is feeling connected, strong, and healthy, we can do that through tuning into our bodies and making decisions that support that, and it puts the focus on our pleasure instead of a measure, which is good for the soul, too.
- If the goal is to meet interesting people who share our passions, falling in love may happen, but those interactions won't have to meet such a high bar in order to be a win, and who knows, you may fall happily in love with a dog food taster, which is an actual job tasting actual dog food.ⁱ It also requires a college degree, or— one imagines, equivalent experience.

I've known self-taught dog food tasters. Personally, I was tasting dog food before I could read. (Precocious!)

The Latin root in the word intention means *to stretch toward*. What value or deeper goal would you like to stretch toward? Something a level below an actual plan. The thing that the plan satisfies. Because, if we don't set our intentions, then what? We may feel stuck. Helpless. Disappointed. Either because the plan we set our hearts on did not turn out to be possible, or, we weren't clear about the intention beneath our planning, so maybe the plan works but feels unsatisfying. Or, with no intention and no plan, we can probably just expect to repeat certain patterns in our lives, whether they are satisfying to us or not.

There's a wonderful quote from the writer Anne Lamott where she talks about what could happen if we don't consciously decide what to stretch toward. About what happens when we let our aversions or fears interfere. She says:

Oh my God, what if you wake up some day and you never got your memoir or novel written; or you didn't go swimming in warm pools and oceans all those years because your thighs were jiggly and you had a nice big comfortable tummy; or you were just so strung out on perfectionism and people-pleasing that you forgot to have a big juicy creative life, of imagination and radical silliness and staring off into space like when you were a kid? It's going to break your heart. Don't let this happen... Pick a new direction and aim for that. Shoot the moon.ⁱⁱ

Another way we can get derailed from living our best lives is if, because we are not clear about our intention, we say yes to the wrong things. We may take on things that take up too much of our time or stress us out and leave us without enough left to invest in what matters most.

Now, I don't mean that we have to be doing extraordinary, Instagram-able kinds of things in order to look like we are living intentionally. That's actually the opposite of what I'm saying. The look of whatever we are doing—that's an outcome. An outcome. The inner part is what matters. You can spend a whole day running tiresome errands with a kid or three in the car, and absolutely meet your intentions around playfulness and compassion. When you all get hangry in the middle of it, you can still nail your intention of modeling problem solving,

apology, and owning your impact. Remember, when are guided by intention and not “best laid plans,” we are at our most flexible and adaptive. That’s important because sometimes things don’t turn out as we intend. I’m going to talk about unintended consequences later this month.

This is an iterative process. There is no “too late.” At various times in our lives we are clearer or foggier about our intentions. Sometimes we get caught up in life’s currents for years and forget to set our own direction. It’s okay. This is an invitation, not something to stress out about. The invitation is: wherever you are now, whatever age or phase, why not decide, with purpose, what to stretch toward next?

And here’s one more thing; a way to level up, if you want, like, masters level intention setting. Ask yourself not just what some of your deeper goals are this year, but what kind of *person* you want to be. What kind of person do you want to be? I’m talking about spiritual qualities. Do you want to be compassionate? Kind? Non-judgmental? Centered? What kind of person do you want to be, no matter what happens this year? Regardless of any wins or losses, adventures, comforts, or disappointments, joys or hurts. What kind of person do you want to be as you respond to all that this year of your life holds? Set an intention around that.

The month of January, you may know, is named after the Roman god Janus, the god of beginnings and endings, transitions, doorways, passages, and time. Janus is depicted with two faces, one looking toward the past and one toward the future. I love it when ancient human wisdom is hidden in plain sight in contemporary society. There are times to notice thresholds, to set new courses, to take stock. The turning of a year is one humans have recognized across cultures and millenia, according to their varied calendars.

They—our collective ancestors—invite you, too.

Beautiful. Got it. Sweet.

ⁱ <https://recipes.howstuffworks.com/food-facts/food-careers/food-taster3.htm>

ⁱⁱ I found this quote in Soul Matters worship resources materials for January 2021. It’s widely shared on the internet, though I do not know its original source of publication.