

AMERICA'S AUTUMNS: 3RD TURNINGS
Exodus 1:15-22
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"O, Generations!" SSS

INTRODUCTION

Four weeks ago, June 21st, we began the 2nd section of our 2011 Summer Sermon Series, "*O, Generations!*" regarding the 4 turnings which recur throughout American history. We began with the 2nd Turning, the Awakening, which occurred from 1964 to 1984. Because so much time has elapsed since June 21st's start to this 2nd section, I want to do a quick review of what the 4 turnings are and why they are important to the church.

The 4 recurrent turnings together cover a period of approximately 80 years: a normal human lifetime. Each turning lasts approximately 20 years, 1 generation, meaning that every generation, in general experiences all 4 turnings. Each turning begins some 2 to 4 years after the first birth year of a new generation. For example, the 2nd turning started in 1964, 3 years after the GenXers first birth year of 1961.

The 4 turnings have one unmistakable quality about them: they follow the pattern of nature's 4 seasons. Second turnings, awakenings, behave like summers. They are hot-tempered times touching off hot-button ethical issues like: Vietnam and Civil Rights in the last 2nd turning; Slavery and States Rights during the 2nd Turning of the 1820's to 1840's. Third

Turnings always reflect autumns, when “Days of Rage¹” turn into Days of Debate, loud but less violent than 2nd Turnings. Fourth Turnings are America’s winters: They are periods of darkness and crisis. The last 4th Turning was the Great Depression and World War II; before that the Civil War. Finally, the cycle starts all over with 1st Turnings, or “Highs,” which reflect the hopes of springtime. These are literally the Fonz’s 50’s “Happy Days” or the glorious period of American expansion in the early 1800’s.

Our purpose in examining these 4 turnings is 2-fold: to discern how the church got to where it is today and to discern where the church may be going based upon the prevailing cultural and economic winds of American society. With this in mind, we turn to our text, disclosing to us a time, a 3rd Turning when Egypt’s economic fabric began to unravel with the birth of Moses, who would grow up to tell Pharaoh to “Let God’s people go.”

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 1:15-22

One of my favorite childhood memories occurred one Sunday autumn afternoon while my family was helping me complete a school project. Each student was assigned the task of composing a scrapbook of autumn leaves, the surest sign of summer’s passing and the advent of winter’s return.

Our family hopped in the car and drove some of the, then, sparsely populated county roads of southern Johnson County, Kansas, and plucked all

kinds of brilliantly festooned autumn leaves to put in my scrapbook. That very outing replaced my love of spring with a lifelong love of autumn.

Third turnings, like the last 3rd Turning from 1985-2005, are like brightly-hued autumn leaves. 3rd Turnings reflect the now more senior Silent generation's embrace of diversity. As the last 2nd Turning was ending in 1984, the Rev. Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" emerged. Gay-Lesbian advocate groups adopted the rainbow as a sign that God's love embraces gender diversity. Individuals were free to show their "True Colors," whether from differing opinions on issues like Abortion and the Death penalty to the bright tattoos people inked on their bodies. Whenever 3rd Turnings occur in America, "society and institutions finally relax from the battles of the 2nd Turning. People work out relationship patterns under the guidance of Adaptive generations like the Silents. People explore all kinds of religious and spiritual options led by Boomer-like Idealist generations.²" Third Turnings are times of cultural experimentation, when immigration reaches its zenith, whether from Mexico and Latin America the past 30 years, Europeans in the early 1900's, or the Irish and Scots-Irish in the 1820's to 1840's, when our denomination's founders came to this continent. 3rd Turnings look a lot like autumn leaves. Authors Strauss and Howe wax poetic about such autumnal Third Turnings:

At summer's end nature creates a mood of satiation. Like Joseph Wood Krutch's month of August, the end of an Awakening 'creates as she slumbers, replete and satisfied.' ...A [3rd Turning] begins with a cultural treaty that concludes the Awakening. The society has settled the core issues that caused the turbulence: the new self-defined values have triumphed over the old group-defined values. Life can now go on—without apocalypse or utopia yet also without any overall social direction.³”

At the end of the last 2nd Turning and start of the 3rd Turning, many public and private schools and colleges inserted “Fall Breaks” into their schedules. So, 3rd Turnings look a lot like Fall Breaks from intense 2nd Turnings.

And yet, for all their wistfulness, 3rd Turnings also reflect the downside of autumn. Those multi-paletted trees always lose their leaves. The social fabric once so strong during the last 4th Turning Crisis and 1st Turning High starts to unravel, like a sweater with a thread pulled to the sweater's demise; hence Strauss & Howe's summation of 3rd Turnings as “Unravelings.” “By the mid-1990's, pundits agreed that Amercia was deep into a new era of lost purpose and shattered consensus. Economist Robert Samuelson called it a “fragmenting”; *Commentary*, a Balkanization; Thomas Byrne Edsall, an “era of bad feelings,” and Bill Raspberry, an “unraveling.”⁴

The marks of this unraveling are everywhere: In 1983, at the end of the last 2nd turning, a document titled “A Nation At Risk” was published by the U.S. Dept. of Education declaring American schools to be “a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people⁵.” A

sense that the public world is spinning slowly out of control beset many Americans' perception as the country moved from the awakening to the 3rd Turning's "Inner-Driven," self-absorbed era.⁶ Now everyone was "doing their own thing," a tendency Americans show more than any other people on earth in our practice of radical individualism. It's what sociologist Robert Bellah described in his iconic *Habits of the Heart* as "Sheila-ism," based upon the case study of a young woman whose religion was the worship of herself! It's the same mood captured in historian Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* and Robert Putnam's more recent *Bowling Alone*.

This narcissism and Sheila-ism infected all society in the form of Culture Wars. 2nd Turning Idealism morphed into 3rd Turning Ideologies, so obvious in Congress's divisiveness on every social and economic issue it faced. Instead of seeing the cohesion of G.I. and Silent Generations of the late 1940's-early 1960's, young adults see a world of lifestyle fragmentation, geographic fragmentation, racial and ethnic fragmentation.⁷

The relevance for the church? Included among those institutions coming unraveled this last 3rd Turning was the church, in particular the old mainline Protestant Churches often still stuck in the last High, the 1st Turning of circa 1955! During the 80's and 90's many congregations drew battle lines around the issue of Contemporary Worship. Sometimes called

“Worship Wars,” stubbornly resistant generations refused to budge from offering only traditional services. They refused to consider contemporary worship as an option for combating declining worship attendance.

But the prospect of experimenting with the addition of contemporary worship was quintessential 3rd Turning! To the chagrin of many pastors and churches, such experimentation brought with it loss of clear institutional identity. One comment I have heard more times than I can count over the past 25 years is how our denomination and churches “have lost our identity.” Welcome to the 3rd Turning where churches, denominations, and institutions of every kind undergo a wrenching attempt to redefine themselves in the most highly individualistic turning of all: The Unraveling!

Of course, the question ought to be asked: How did such multi-hued autumn leaf-like diverse individualism arise in the first place? The answer is more complicated than we have time for here, but simply put: veterans of World War II and the Cold War were so violently opposed to the destructive forces of conformist, totalitarian Nazi fascism in Germany and Marxist Communism in Russia they sought to ensure maximum opportunities for individual self-expression and creativity in their children: the Boomers and GenXers. Little did these veterans know they were unleashing the kind of narcissistic consumerism that so marks all 3rd Turnings. Over the past 50

years community values and interests have been sacrificed on the altar of individual rights! Over this same time period “Americans have understood that they were living in a newly individualistic era and they liked the openness, affluence, and lifestyle freedom it seemed to bring to their lives. Yet poll after poll showed they also worried about America’s weakening sense of national cohesion and looked with special alarm at how unmet community needs were endangering the lives of their children.⁸” Hence, our national indifference to rebuilding infrastructure: highways, bridges, sewer lines. Few realized that repudiation of community needs by dismantling government, schools, and churches goes hand-in-hand with the headlong pursuit of maximizing individual wants and needs! But toward the end of 3rd Turnings there comes a dread that long delayed community bills are coming due: that long-neglected institutions and organizations of all kinds are crying for attention, including the church, and that without such attention more than levees in New Orleans and along the Missouri River will break.

Many do not understand that America and churches only work when there is a balance between individual needs (reborn in 2nd Turn Awakenings) and community values (reborn during 4th Turning Crises). Society only successfully negotiates the future by properly balancing both individual

initiative and economic, political, and social justice for all; in particular society's weakest and poorest.

This is why, as the United States, and now so many countries our nation has influenced, from Greece to Japan, move deeper into the 4th Turning, there is the uneasy feeling, that “personal autonomy and institutional overthrow will persist indefinitely⁹.” As so many economies stumble and languish, an increasing dread abounds in ours and our nation's beloved institutions' souls that we are all on our own, that the wealthy powers-that-be do not care to mend the unraveling fabric of our society or to work for true justice in our world unless they are forced to. This is the dread that comes and has come at the end of previous 3rd Turnings in our country that all the multi-colored autumn leaves are now off the trees and all that lay ahead is perpetual winter. This is the mark of the 4th Turning, where America “from G.I. to Silent to Boom, has gone from moon walk to gridlock to train wreck¹⁰.” It is to this 4th Turning we will direct our attention next week; in the knowledge that 4th Turnings, like all Turnings come and go; and that the church has survived them all, often to greater, better result. It is with this knowledge of where we are heading we dare to remember our Lord's words: *“Let those who have ears to hear, listen.”*

¹William Strauss & Neal Howe, *Generations: A History of America's Future, 1584-2069*, NY: Quill, 1991,

p. 311.

²Carl G. Eeman, "I Have Seen the Promised Land", *Generations of Faith*, Washington, D.C., the Alban Institute, 2002, p. 141.

³William Strauss & Neal Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, NY: Broadway Books, 1997, pp. 176 & 208.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵Strauss & Howe, *Millennials Rising*, NY: Vintage Books, 2000, p. 145.

⁶Strauss & Howe, *Generations*, p. 298.

⁷Strauss & Howe, *Millennials Rising*, p. 104.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

⁹*Fourth Turning*, p. 208.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 225.