

***THE WINTERS OF OUR DISCONTENT: AMERICA'S 4<sup>TH</sup> TURNINGS***  
**Genesis 41:14-41**  
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***"O, Generations!"* SSS**

**INTRODUCTION:**

By now, in this Series, "O Generations" one question has surely dawned on everyone: "What does all this talk of 6 living American Generations and 4 Turnings have to do with the church? We're about spirituality here, not secular things like history and economics!" If we still lived in the Age of the Enlightenment when all of life was neatly pigeon-holed into exclusive categories this would be true. But we don't. In my estimation: if we are to understand church life in America today we have to understand both American history and church history parallel each other.

But this answer may not suffice. And so, I want to say that, while spirituality is the church's top priority, we cannot separate spirituality from history or church life from society, without violating the integrity of the scriptures; because the Bible doesn't neatly distinguish categories of life experiences like spirituality from economics as the Enlightenment did.

If we think it does, we may as well toss the Bible! The Book of Revelation is about the church's problems with Caesar and Rome. Jesus' Parable of the Dishonest Steward in Luke 16 is set in the context of threatened unemployment and homelessness, something all kinds of

Americans worry about today. Our text from Genesis is all about economic prudence and foresight, which we could use a lot more of these days.

Everything from each Sunday's offerings to the level of our commitment to worship and daily Christian living is closely tied to the things that happen to our society, historically, politically, culturally, and economically. As theologian Karl Barth once remarked, "I preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." We catch a glimpse of this proximity of church and society in today's text in which Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream of 7 fat years followed by 7 lean years (a 1<sup>st</sup> Turning High followed by a 4<sup>th</sup> Turning Low) not only endears him to Pharaoh, but saves Joseph's family, and ultimately the entire Jewish nation:

**SCRIPTURE: selected verses from Genesis 41: 14-41**

We've all heard lightning never strikes the same place twice. Just don't tell that to the Rooney family of New Jersey. During a backyard barbecue, a lightning strike knocked one family member down and then traveled underground, blasting the bark off a tree, killing 54-year old Stephen Rooney. As awful as that was 48 years earlier when Stephen was only 5 lightning struck and killed his father while hold a fishing knife in his hand. Sadder yet, when the storm began and the family was ready to head for cover, Stephen told everyone, "Don't worry guys, we're all right out

here; besides you're with me and lightning never strikes the same family twice.”<sup>1</sup>

Welcome to the 4<sup>th</sup> Turning where lightning strikes America every 80 years. Consider America's major wars (even if all wars to some degree could be called “major”) which mark previous 4<sup>th</sup> Turnings. Subtract 80 years as we go: WWII in the 1940's, the Civil War in the 1860's, the Revolutionary War in the 1780's, and the French & Indian Wars in the early 1700's. Or consider how the single worst year of the Great Recession, 2009, happened exactly 80 years after the October Crash of 1929.

Before we subscribe to the idea that such recurrent 4<sup>th</sup> Turnings are *fait accompli*, it's important to remember all Turnings result from human decisions, not some “unseen hand” or arbitrary “Act of God.”

Yet, America is particularly predisposed to 4th Turnings, which often get confused with the biblical “End of the World” and all the wild predictions folks try to perpetrate on others. Due to our nation's global influence today, exporting our political and economic values, 4<sup>th</sup> Turnings now occur in other countries. With so many economies pegged to the U.S. dollar, as America goes, so goes the world. For instance, I found it striking that in a conversation René and I had in remote Santiago, Spain, while at a lunch counter next to a woman in the financial sector in Hong Kong, named

Virginia, said, “We cannot afford for your country to have another Lehman Brothers;”<sup>2</sup> another collapse of a major U.S. bank. According to the HBO Movie “Too Big To Fail,”<sup>3</sup> our country came within a hare’s breath of our economy’s collapse, when Henry Paulson, George W. Bush, Ben Bernanke, and Timothy Geitner designed TARP to bail out America’s banking industry at the end of 2008. Now both the best Democrat and Republican analysts tell us if Washington doesn’t find a solution to the debt ceiling by Tuesday, August 2, America will have to default on its loans, damaging our country’s credit rating, sending interest rates skyrocketing, and possibly putting already fragile European economies into “a death spiral!”

Not that such an Up-vote to raise the debt ceiling will automatically solve our nation’s financial woes. While it’s unlikely our nation’s economy will ever reach the point of bread lines and Hooverville tent cities as in the 1930’s, economic pain today is just as real and just as frightening.

While this 4<sup>th</sup> Turning probably began by no later than 2007, many of the pieces leading to this latest winter in America’s history were being put in place for some time. Jean Twenge in *Generation Me* writes,

From 1971 to 2002 the income of men ages 25 to 34 with full-time jobs dropped 17%. [Social] scientist Robert Putnam concludes, “Virtually all of the increase in full-time employment of American women over the last 20 years is attributable to financial pressures, not personal fulfillment.” Average student loan debt has increased 85% in the last 10 years alone; 66% of recent college graduates

owe more than \$10,000 and 5% owe more than \$100,000. The average is about \$15,000. And that's just undergrad; add graduate or professional school loans and things get even worse. Sarah, 29, wrote 'I have a TON of debt from my law school loan: Six digits.'<sup>4</sup>

This data is corroborated by other sources.<sup>5</sup> We might add this doesn't take into account unbelievable rising costs for child care. Carol Howard Merritt in her book *Tribal Church*<sup>6</sup> says young adults are looking for understanding from older church members because of the financial Everest they face in starting their families and finding reliable, rewarding employment.

It can be argued that with the ratio of earners to those on Social Security slipping from 5:1 sixty years ago to slightly less than 3:1 today, it's understandable why many more young adults believe in UFO's than the likelihood they'll ever receive Social Security. It also has implications for many of us Boomers as we look toward long periods of retirement and whether those resources will still be available in years to come.

All this has crucial implications for churches. Unless seniors choose to be as generous in the next life in their estate planning as they were in this life, unless middle aged adults seriously consider sacrificial giving as an option, and young adults give at least a token of their income to the church, some dark financial days may lie ahead for many churches. Already the Hartford Institute indicates that while 57% of existing churches have been

affected financially by the recession, 5% will not rebound from the present Recession.<sup>7</sup> So much for the idea that economics plays no role in church!

Are we having fun, yet? If so, it may be too many Americans are “sleepwalking through history.”<sup>8</sup> Santayana said, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” “Thomas Dolan in *Barron’s*, 2005, said, ‘The lesson of history is that we don’t learn the lessons of history.’”<sup>9</sup> We keep repeating the same mistakes that lead to America’s recurring “Winters of Our Discontent,”<sup>10</sup> America’s 4<sup>th</sup> Turnings.

You know, it’s only been since René and I moved here 15 years ago I have ever found people who say they like winters. I’ve always scratched my head wondering why this could be true, but it is. I know until she was 18 Texan René only saw 1 snow. This heat-wave notwithstanding, many of us would do nicely without winters. Yet, as we sing each Sunday from Ecclesiastes 3:1, “*To everything, turn, turn, turn; there is a season, and a time for everything under heaven.*” This includes winters, 4<sup>th</sup> Turnings.

Though winters, 4<sup>th</sup> Turnings; don’t have to be bad things. Winters are times for hibernating for both fauna and flora. Winters can be times of meditation, such as Lent, that great transition from winter to springtime. Sometimes, we even have to admit, hard times can be times of transformation and of making changes too long delayed. We’d all agree: we

grow more from our failures than from our successes. Winters, 4<sup>th</sup> Turning Crises, also have the silver-lining of building community. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam says this north-central part of our country has more social capital, in part because winter drives people together inside for warmth. My Depression-era parents often spoke longingly of that period as a time when people drew closer together. Still...such times are often very painful, no matter the happy endings which may result. But that growth is usually the result of learning some tough lessons on the way.

So, how do we overcome 4<sup>th</sup> Turning Crises?

Often history is our best teacher and the way people understood and dealt with the last 4<sup>th</sup> Turning, the Depression, can be instructive for us now. As Mark Twain once observed, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it sometimes rhymes.”<sup>11</sup> We first need to connect the dots.

While policymakers over the decades learned many hard lessons from the Great Depression, including to institute the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation for insuring the first \$100,000 of a household’s savings, “the *larger* lesson of the 1930’s was not learned: viz., **the economy needs to be reorganized so the broad middle class has enough buying power to rejuvenate the economy over the long term.** Until we take this lesson to heart, we will be living indefinitely with the Great Recession’s aftershock of

high unemployment and low wages, and an increasingly angry middle class whose wages in the 3 decades leading to the Crash of 2008 hardly increased and actually declined during the 2000s.

But this wasn't true for all. The share of total income going to the richest 1 percent of Americans peaked in both 1928 and 2007 at over 23%. The same pattern held for the richest 1/10 of 1% (representing 13,000 households in 2007), at over 11% of all American income. And the same pattern applies for the richest 10%, who in both 1928 and 2007 received almost ½ the total. It doesn't take a math genius to realize that in both 1928 and 2007, the years preceding crashes, the lower 90% of Americans shared the remaining 50%. When total wealth, a larger category than income, is considered, matters worsen! The top 1% richest at the start of the Great Depression possessed 34% of the nation's wealth. Over the past 15 years the top 1% owned a range of 32-43%. The United States always has a recession or a depression when wealth distribution becomes so unbalanced.

So, what happens under such an imbalance? People live off credit cards, installment plans, 2<sup>nd</sup> mortgages, and equity loans. They supplement their plateau, if not declining income, by buying on credit, if available.

But what happens when banks tighten credit, which has been one result of the bursting of the housing bubble, for example? People stop

buying. What happens when people stop buying? Companies lower inventories and raise prices. How do companies lower inventories? They manufacture less. What happens when companies manufacture less? Jobs are lost. What do people do who lose their jobs? They go to the purchaser of last resort for help: the U.S. government. But what does the U.S. government do when employment declines and revenues plummet from loss of taxes and keeping up the safety net? It runs up larger deficits. Do you catch the vicious cycle? This is made worse when, as Virginia, our lunch-mate in Santiago, says, our banks continue pulling the same tricks they did before TARP: speculating with their money rather than investing in Americans and America. Wild financial speculation is always a sign that a nation's wealthiest have more money than they can realistically spend. The problem the wealthiest have isn't that they live too high, but that they don't invest in new businesses that generate higher inventories, more manufacturing, and more jobs. If I can understand this, so can you, and so can people in Washington!

But will they? This is the \$64 question. Unhappily, our government basically serves narrow wealthy, private-sector interests. At what point, for example, will big banks and corporations sitting on a record \$1.9 trillion dollars of profits<sup>12</sup> begin to invest in America instead of only their bottom

lines. It isn't that these banks should be unprofitable, but not amassing wealth at the expense of everyone else. Both government and big business, along with tax policies that reinforce concentration of wealth are at fault for assuring this particular 4<sup>th</sup> Turning crisis will worsen, not improve. They have become an alternative Pharaoh, who ignored instead of acted on the warning and now the fact of 7 lean years. Everyone's bottom line is affected by this arrogance, churches too!

But this series will not end here on a sour note. This is why I have reserved the end of this series to next week's 1<sup>st</sup> Turning. Next week I will share the story of one unlikely big businessman from Utah, who showed Franklin Roosevelt and America the way out of the last 4<sup>th</sup> Turning. He may have been a Gray Champion, a special figure who in each 4<sup>th</sup> Turning steps up to lead the nation to another High, another First Turning.

Besides, we Christians and churches never end the story at the cross, at winter, but on Easter and the coming of Spring! Tune in next week.

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<sup>1</sup> From WCAU/NBC TV, affiliate in Hammonton, New Jersey; July 14, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> A conversation held in Santiago, Spain, Tuesday, June 28, 2011. Virginia never revealed her full name.

<sup>3</sup> "Too Big Too Fail," HBO, first broadcast May 23, 2011, based on the 2009 book by Andrew Ross Sorkin.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generation Me*, NY: Free Press, 2006, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Wall Street Journal*, Wednesday, July 13, p. 1; Robert Reich, *Aftershock: The Next Economy & America's Future*, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2011, pp. 18-27.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church*, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Found in Nebraska Disciple News of June 6, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Based upon Haynes Johnson's book of the same title, NY: W.W. Horton, 1991, about the rapid rise in the nation's debt during the Reagan Presidency.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy*, NY: Viking Press, p. 298

<sup>10</sup> A title of a book by renowned author John Steinbeck, who also wrote the Depression era book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck borrowed the phrase from Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

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<sup>11</sup> From Robert B. Reich's *Aftershock, The Next Economy and America's Future*, NY: Albert Knopf, 2010, p. 19. Many of the comments from this point on reference Reich's book.

<sup>12</sup> According to an MSNBC commentary on the economy on Saturday, July 23, 2011