

HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN: AMERICA'S 1ST TURNINGS

Isaiah 35:1-10

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"O, Generations!" SSS

Imagine growing up in a world that feels *post-truth*, *post-sacrifice*, *post-heroic*, *post-anything* truly ennobling.¹ This is how America feels every 80 years at the start of 4th Turnings; more recently, after the last 2nd Turning Summer Awakening of the 1960's and 70's, the last 3rd Turning Autumn Unraveling of the 1980's-early 2000's, and now in the present 4th Turning Winter Crisis, The Great Recession. As Thomas Paine wrote more than 2 centuries ago during another 4th Turning, "These are the times that try men's souls."² How we long for something resembling the Spring-like Happy Days of the last 1st Turning of the late 1940's-early 1960's, even those who know it only by its reputation! Today America feels like "a deep and dark, December"³ when no evidence exists that another spring-like 1st Turning will ever reappear. The debt ceiling crisis suggests we may not even be to February yet. Unemployment remains stubbornly high. Housing looks like it may never revive. The gap between rich and poor, especially between minorities and white Americans has reached historic levels. If America ever needed a hero, another Gray Champion, to lead us out of this present 4th Turning into the Promised Land of another First Turning suggested by our text from Isaiah, that time is now.

Last week I said we would not end this series “*O, Generations*” on a sour note, with America’s recurrent winter 4th Turning. Today I want to fulfill that promise. We are, after all, Christians who respect winter’s desolation, but believe in Easter and nature’s resurrection in spring!

I also indicated I would introduce to you a Gray Champion like Lincoln and Roosevelt, who, though little known, may very well have been the most influential American of the 20th century because of his leadership in helping this country through an even worse economic crisis than we are now facing into the last 4th Turning. Who was this man?

His name was Marriner Eccles.⁴ One of 21 children of Mormon immigrant David Eccles from Glasgow, Marriner trudged off to Scotland at the start of 1910 as a Mormon missionary, but returned home 2 years later to become a bank president. By 24 he was a millionaire. By 40 he was a tycoon—director of railroad, hotel, and insurance companies; head of a bank holding company controlling 26 banks; and president of lumber, milk, sugar, and construction companies spanning the Rockies to the Sierra Nevada.

In the Crash of 1929, his businesses were sufficiently diverse and his banks adequately capitalized that he stayed afloat financially. But he was deeply shaken when his assumption that the economy would quickly return to normal was proved incorrect. By late 1930 he came to realize that

something was profoundly wrong, not just with the economy but with his own understanding of it. He said, “I awoke to find myself at the bottom of a pit without any known means of scaling its sheer sides. All I could find within myself was despair.”

“When Eccles’s anxious bank depositors began demanding their money, he called in loans and reduced credit to shore up the banks’ reserves. But the reduced lending caused further economic harm. He and other bankers realized that by saving their banks at the expense of community ‘we were contributing to collective ruin.’ He discovered ‘millions of our people hadn’t enough purchasing power for even their barest needs.’

“Many business leaders and economists of the day believed ‘a depression was the scientific operation of economic laws that were God-given, not man-made, and could not be interfered with;’ much as the biblical story of Joseph and the 7 lean years I mentioned last week. Many business leaders wrote off the Depression as symbolic of the lean years. They also explained the lean years as a result of Americans having been spendthrifts and wastrels in the ‘Roaring 20’s.’ The same businessmen believed in time the economy would right itself through the action of men who had been prudent and thrifty all along, and who at the right time would reinvest in new production, when the famine would end.

“But Eccles found this nonsense. As a devout Mormon he saw that what passed for the God-given operation of economics ‘was nothing more than a determination of this or that interest to resist any new rules that might be to their disadvantage.’ He also saw that ‘men with great economic power had undue influence in making the rules of the economic game, in shaping the actions of government that enforced those rules, and in conditioning the attitude of people toward those rules.’ **Eccles concluded that the economic game was not being played on a level field. It was tilted in favor of those with the most wealth and power.**

“Eccles arrived at these ideas not by any temperamental or cultural affinity—he was, after all, a banker and of Scottish descent—but by logic and experience. He merely connected the dots. His program, shared with the Senate Finance Committee in February 1933, weeks before Roosevelt took office, included relief for the unemployed, government spending on public works, government financing of mortgages, a federal minimum wage, federally supported old-age pensions, and **higher income taxes and inheritance taxes on the wealthy in order to control capital accumulations and avoid excessive speculation.** Initially his ideas were ignored by the new president, who seemed to do as Herbert Hoover and offer a hodge-podge of ideas cooked up by Wall Street to keep it afloat but

do little for anyone else.” But soon, Eccles accepted FDR’s appointment of him as the new Federal Reserve Chair, in 1934; a position Eccles only accepted on condition of controlling the money supply. Because of Eccles’s design, federal spending increased enough to lower the unemployment rate during the early 1930’s from nearly 25% to slightly below 14%. Many facets of the New Deal that put people back to work originated with Eccles.

Though one major setback did occur; in August 1937, with lasting repercussions. After Roosevelt’s 1st re-election, FDR tried to balance the budget, after cutting the federal deficit by half in 1936. Those two actions threw the U.S. back into the Depression, and increased unemployment to over 19%. Only WWII ended the Depression. But, while WWII gets the credit for righting the economy and sending America into the 1st Turning High, what Robert Reich calls “The Great Prosperity” between 1946-1964, what really brought the Depression to an end wasn’t the war, per se, but going to full-employment using federal dollars; i.e. federal spending!

But most dramatic was a conversation Eccles had with FDR about taxes in 1942. Eccles recommended to Roosevelt that income over \$50,000 per year be taxed at a rate of 100%! But Roosevelt answered, “No.” FDR said any income over \$25,000 (\$370,000) would be taxed at a rate of 100%. Though congress later rescinded this decision, the U.S. government from

1942 through beyond 1964, essentially outlawed the creation of new millionaires. It was only after the top 2 tax rates of 91% and 71% were cut after 1964 that new millionaires resumed being created in large numbers.⁵ While Roosevelt is considered by Strauss and Howe in *The Fourth Turning*, as one of America's "Gray Champions," Eccles is more truly that hero.

Underscoring this is a chart covering the years from 1913 to 2007. The two peaks on the graph are 1928 and 2007 when the top 1% wealthiest Americans received 23% of the nation's income. The 1928 peak represents the precursor to the Great Crash of 1929; the 2nd peak the precursor to the Great Recession. The valley in between 1943-1983 covers the years of "The Great Prosperity" when America's Middle Class grew more rapidly than at any point in American history, when churches were most prosperous and when the wealthy were taxed at the highest effective rate.

No one today going on vacation to Washington, D.C. ever goes to see the Federal Reserve Building; but if they did, they'd see that building bears the name of Marriner Eccles, who was Fed chair from 1934 to 1948.

Why go to such lengths to speak of how the U.S. moved from the last 4th Turning to the last 1st Turning? In a word: the way forward is to look backwards and apply history's lessons, solutions, and successes to today.

Take the church: For the longest time I thought that when Americans

face a crisis they run to church for solace and refuge. Alas! I was wrong. During Israel's 4th Turning of exile for 60 years in Babylon many transplanted Jews became assimilated into Babylonian culture. So many Americans became assimilated into secular culture during the Roaring 20's, they remained outside the church.⁶ As I suggested last week, many churches face enormous financial pressure in a 4th Turning. One exception to this is those "congregations and denominations whose ministry is primarily with the poor. In the 4th Turning of the 1930's the Salvation Army, various Holiness congregations, and urban missions saw strong and lasting increases in attendance and membership, significantly above the general population trend line."⁷

What might we learn from this last 4th Turning? We need to learn that our churches need to become more hands-on mission-oriented. A decline in financial resources doesn't have to mean mission and ministry must decline; but be renewed in local settings. Churches that fortify themselves in their buildings suffer the most.

You see, hope is not lost during 4th Turnings. I grew up in a family where my mother, bless her soul, was a Cassandra, a person who always sees disaster coming, the glass half-empty. After years away from home, it dawned on me things can also get better. Not in a Pollyanna sort of way,

always looking at life through rose-colored glasses, but knowing God always sees us through!

Strauss & Howe predict that “America will acquire an entire generational line-up more power-packed than any since WWII”⁸ in this 4th Turning to see America forward into another 1st Turning. Boomer-like Idealist/Prophets will provide the large vision, like Lincoln and FDR. Gen-X-like Pragmatist-Nomads will provide the workable solutions. They are the Murriner Eccleses who find the way forward and aren’t tied to frozen traditions. Millennial-like Team-Player/Heroes are the G.I.’s: “excellent builders of community, to which they believe everyone (especially others like themselves), can and wants to belong.”⁹ Silent-like Manager-Artists are too young to contribute much during 4th Turnings, but will play their part later to amend 1st Turning excesses, like often required conformity.

But the foundation of 1st Turnings are laid in the 4th Turning. Remember it was Roosevelt who gave us the 1932 campaign song, “Happy Days Are Here Again,” on the promise the Depression wouldn’t last forever. First Turnings are filled with happiness and an ecstatic feeling of being on top of the world! Despite fears in 1946 that another world war would break out, that year was the start of the Great Boom, as 1865 began the Industrial Revolution, and as 1794 brought the Constitution and inauguration of

George Washington and the establishment of a stable economy under Alexander Hamilton. In 1952 Kemmons Wilson began planting a national chain of standardized “Holiday Inns” featuring sparkling rooms, new mattresses, air conditioning and a free reservation system. In 1955 Ray Kroc bought out the owners of a successful quick-service hamburger stand in southern California and began feeding masses of auto travelers. In 1956 Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the Federal Aid Highway Act to begin construction of the interstate highway system with its distinctive red, white, & blue shields.¹⁰

And good news at long last comes to the churches. The *spirit d’corps* that brought the G.I.’s victory and honor from the beaches of Normandy to the sands of Iwo Jima benefits the church. In a 1st Turning denominational loyalty peaks, because institutional loyalty is an expression of team playing and community for the prominent Civics (the G.I.’s). WWII European Theater hero President Eisenhower declared, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” So while denominational loyalty is high, actual public differences between faiths are downplayed and historic differences are no longer sources of controversy or division.¹¹ Though racial and gender equality often suffers, religious tolerance is spared.

All institutions benefit in a 1st Turning. Marriage is reaffirmed while divorce declines. Schools improve. Service and fraternal organizations thrive. Infrastructure is repaired. Put this altogether and you see why 1st Turnings are called “Highs.”

Is this what to expect in the next 1st Turning, beginning in the mid 2020's? Will there be another High, another spring in America, a new dawn where years of pain, fear and fighting give way to hope and peace?

History never repeats itself in its particulars. We cannot know for sure how the crisis will play out. A worst-case scenario is that a few “Boomers will start to show a fascination for apocalyptic solutions! Unlike their G.I. fathers, who excelled at *overcoming* crisis; some Boomers are attracted to the possibility of *fomenting* crisis.”¹² But America is impatient with extremism of any kind (right or left). This is likely to remain true.

No, we don't have a crystal ball, but we do have this: If the historic circle of generations still holds and the 4 turnings continue their normal pattern, another 1st Turning will come. Happy Days will be here again. And as in 1946 a grateful nation and grateful churches will know the crisis is past. For 20 more years the country will again breathe a bit easier; and with our African-American sister and brothers we can sing full-throated the great spiritual, “O, Happy Day!”

¹ William Strauss & Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising*, NY: Vintage Books, 2000, p.214.

² Carl G. Eeman, "Hope in the Dark," *Generations of Faith*, Washington: Alban Institute, 2002, p. 152.

³ From Simon & Garfunkel's song, "*I Am a Rock*" 1964.

⁴ Much of the information of this section may be found at the opening of Robert Reich's *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future*, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2010.

⁵ "FDR: Economic Environment," *Wikipedia*, last modified July 26, 2011.

⁶ Noted in a lecture by Richard Hamm, then General Minister and President of the Disciples of Christ, at Countryside Christian Church in Countryside, Kansas in 1991.

⁷ Carl G. Eeman, *Ibid.* p. 157.

⁸ Strauss & Howe, *Ibid.*

⁹ Eeman, *Ibid.*, p. 126

¹⁰ Eeman, "If You Build It, We'll All Come," *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹² Strauss & Howe, *Generations: A History of America's Future: 1584-2069*, NY: Quill, 1990, p. 314.