

THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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Christmas issues an invitation to us all: an invitation to leave the facts behind and embark on a flight of fancy. You and I know, often all too well, the world as it was and the world as it is. Christmas lights our way, if only for a season, to the world as it might be: the guiding star illuminates a world of possibility. For children, Christmas issues an invitation to imagine what Santa might bring if they've been good. For believers in the Christ, Christmas issues an invitation to imagine how the world might be transformed if God's gift to humanity redeems human wickedness. For the rest of us, Christmas issues an invitation to imagine what might be possible in our lives and in the world we live in. As I like to say, Christmas puts me in a subjunctive mood.

Like people, verbs have moods that determine how they behave. In English, verbs have three main moods: indicative, imperative, and subjunctive. A verb in the indicative mood makes a simple statement—"The butterfly has lovely wings"—or asks a simple question: "Where will the butterfly land?" A verb in the imperative mood issues a command: "Look at the butterfly!" A verb in the subjunctive mood expresses a wish, or hope, or desire, or possibility: "If I were a butterfly, I would have wings."

We celebrate Christmas in the subjunctive mood. This festive season doesn't urge us to make factual statements about the present or ask probing questions about the past. Christmas invites us to entertain the child of hope, the herald of possibility, the angel of desire. What is your Christmas wish?

In our usual lives, it's easy for the subjunctive mood to go missing. Christmas is when we get it back. In her poem titled "The Return of the Subjunctive," the contemporary American poet Tamara Madison writes:

Oh, the Subjunctive,
May it make its bold return!
May it ride back proud
In liveried coach,
May its two fine horses snort
And paw the ground,

And, escorted by its staunch
Attendants If and Whether,
May it descend in velvet cloak
And black-gloved hand
The lacquered steps of hope
And happenstance...
May it light again the land
Between the world that was
And is, and that which still might be,
And may we tread again desire's
Leaf-dappled path
Of possibility.

As Christmas approaches, it's time for the subjunctive to come riding back proud, escorted by its attendants If and Whether. The subjunctive comes to us, the poet says, upon the lacquered steps of hope to light for us the path between the world that was and is, and the world that still might be. As we follow the lead of the subjunctive, walking in the footsteps of If and Whether, we'll tread once again upon desire's leaf-dappled path of possibility. What is your Christmas wish?

Simply put, the subjunctive mood makes the future possible, because it enables us to imagine a future that is different from the present. It gives us the freedom to use words like *if* and *whether*, *could* and *would*, *might* and *may*. The main use of the subjective mood in English comes when we use the word *if*, which introduces conditional clauses. If I were a butterfly, I would have wings. It turns out that the development of the conditional clause may have been a major turning point in human history.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Jared Diamond describes the evolution of humans and our ancestors over the past several million years. For most of this time, Diamond observes, very little happened—and what did happen did so very slowly. The tools our ancestors used a million years ago, for example, differ little from those used 100,000 years ago. All the major innovations happened relatively recently.

Beginning about 50,000 years ago, however (give or take a few thousand years), something remarkable happened; and in a mere 2,500 generations, the population of the planet exploded from a few thousand humans to nearly 7 billion. What happened? Diamond calls it The Great Leap Forward: a sea change in human capability and behavior. Over a relatively short span of time, people

developed finely crafted tools made of bone and other materials, which in turn made possible the development of deadlier weapons. Armed with these, men began to hunt in groups. Art began to appear—clear evidence that our ancestors had become capable of abstract, contemplative thought.

What precipitated this great leap forward? Diamond and other experts suggest various explanations: a change in brain organization, the perfection of the voice box, a favorable mutation in a language gene. In his book *Ancestors*, Richard Dawkins proposes that the Great Leap Forward might have come from a leap forward in language itself, such as the development of the conditional clause and the subjunctive mood: the ability to move from talking about what is to talking about what might or could be.

Until then, humans lived in the indicative mood: this rock, that water hole, this fire, that stick. The subjunctive mood allowed them to think—and talk—about what might or could be. Even though there's no water hole on this side of the mountain, there might be one on the other side. What if we drive the antelope over the cliff to kill them? Would that work? What if we sharpen a bone and lash it to a stick? Could we use that to defend ourselves?

Once the possibilities began to flow, they came in a rush. What if we do this? What if we try that? Regardless of its exact role in human history, the ability to live in the subjunctive mood and deploy the conditional clause accelerated the great leap forward.

Christmas invites us to do the same: to live in the subjunctive mood and deploy the conditional clause. The past has passed and the present is precisely what it is. No matter. History is not destiny—especially not at Christmas. What child of hope beckons to you? What herald of possibility resounds in your ears? What angel of desire sparks your imagination? What great leap forward do you want to make?

It might involve your work or your primary relationship, or how you spend your money or with whom you spend your time. It might involve your children or your parents, or to whom you give your best energies or to what you make your most enduring commitments. As individuals, Christmas invites us to live in the subjunctive mood.

As a congregation, it invites us to do the same. Many of you were here last Sunday for my sermon titled “The Character Code,” about sex trafficking, prostitution, and pornography. The number of emails, notes, and phone calls I have received in response to that sermon has been unprecedented in my 18 years at All Souls. Some of you shared your own experience of being brutalized; others expressed shock and outrage at the scope of the problem; still others offered

suggestions as to how we might combat this modern-day slave trade. What if the women among us and around us didn't need to fear sexual violence? All of us hope for a great leap forward.

Over the past week, my mind returned to the pivotal role All Souls played in the creation of the National Sanitary Commission, which cared for the wounded on both sides during the Civil War. After the war ended, the Sanitary Commission provided the basis for the organization that became the American Red Cross. The reason for the congregation's success was that everyone contributed: as minister, Bellows did his part; but so did everyone else. Among other things, they raised nearly six million dollars—a huge sum in 1860s dollars—for the effort. They demonstrated the power that can be unleashed when the potential of an institution like All Souls engages the deep passion of its congregation in meeting the urgent needs of our world. During the more recent AIDS crisis, our congregation enabled our city and nation to make a great leap forward in recognizing that AIDS is a human disease that requires a humane response.

When you look at All Souls in the indicative mood, everything is more or less fine. I'm proud of what we have accomplished over the past four years, even in the face of the economic downturn. It's true that today we have about 20% less funding available for operating expenses than we had four years ago, partly because Annual Giving is down about 10% from its high in 2007 and partly because we've initiated a policy of not using capital reserves to pay for operating expenses. But our finances are better administered, our reporting is more transparent—and we're doing a better job of safeguarding our endowment.

During this same period, we've embarked on a planning process that describes how we want to be different as a congregation over the next few years. We've begun acting on our aspirations by enhancing our hospitality and communication, bolstering our pastoral care efforts, and launching small-group ministry. In other words, we've been successfully doing more with less—and rightly so, given the economic circumstances. The time has come, however, when our ability to continue to do more requires more resources.

What if we as a congregation today developed the resources to make a great leap forward in doing the work that is ours to do—both within our congregation and in the world around us? It's time for the subjunctive mood. The question isn't what we have; the question is what we want. Do we want to make a great leap forward—in ministry among us, in outreach to those who need us in our neighborhood, in portraying a different way of being religious in our fractious

nation, in making the world safer for women and girls? Do we want to make a great leap forward?

If so, we'll need to increase our commitment and our capacity as a congregation: we'll need to serve more and give more. We'll need more volunteers to do the work and more staff to coordinate and focus our efforts. Four years ago, our staff was a third smaller than the staff of a congregation our size should be. While we've reallocated some roles, our overall capacity as a staff hasn't increased.

Here's a question in the subjunctive mood: what if all of us doubled our pledge to All Souls? I realize that this may require some sacrifice; but this is Christmas, and I'm allowed to dream. Truth be told, some of us would find a 20% increase challenging, while others among us could give five or ten times their current amount without undue hardship.

Over the past week, my wife Holly and I have spent some time in the subjunctive mood, and we have decided to put our money where our dreams are: we're going to double our contribution to All Souls this fiscal year, which ends in June. It won't be easy for us, but we believe in All Souls. We have a dream about the difference we as a congregation could make. By doubling our contribution, we're hoping to be part of a great leap forward for All Souls. I urge you to join us, if at all possible.

At Christmas, the subjunctive comes riding back proud upon the lacquered steps of hope. The season lights for us the path between the world that was and is, and the world that still might be. As we walk in the footsteps of If and Whether, we tread once again desire's leaf-dappled path of possibility. What is your Christmas wish—for yourself, for our congregation, for our world? Imagine a great leap forward in your life. What do you want for Christmas?