

NOW AND EVER: GLORIOUS SPLENDOR, WONDROUS WORKS; PS. 145:1-5, 17-21; LUKE 19: 1-10; 11.10. 2019; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH

Part I: The Now half of Now and Ever. A good friend remembers how in the spring of the year, they would keep their horses out of sections of the pasture with an electric wire and a gate until the young grass grew enough to withstand the horses.

Her vivid memory is of opening the gate in springtime when the grass matured and she would watch with delight as horses rushed in frolicking until they remembered that they were celebrating getting to eat, then start munching away.

The last sentence of the psalm today resounds, 'let every creature "praise God's name for ever and ever."' Those horses are, I would argue, a pretty good illustration of creatures praising the Creator – so absorbed in the moment of being let into a new green pasture that their first response before lowering their heads to eat is to romp and frolic like children.

Maybe children and animals are more in the now than adults and therefore more given to spontaneous bursts of laughter and leaps for joy as they encounter the wonder of daily existence – as they get lost in what the psalmist calls the wondrous works of God.

When I say those horses were praising the Creator I don't mean they were reciting the 145th psalm or Westminster Confession while they leaped in the new grass; I mean they and the new field of grass were at one; there was no intellectual lens to get in the way of or dilute the splendor and glory of that moment.

I think of my granddaughter at age three walking through a parking lot spotting an acorn, stopping in her tracks, bending over to pick it up, then holding it out to me as if she were holding the world's largest diamond.

Sometimes we take such a serious view of the world that we adults, and perhaps Presbyterian adults more than others, miss the abundance of life in an ordinary day, in the present moment just staring us in the face.

We tend to regard lesser forms of life – be they mammal or other species or just juvenile versions of our own species as lesser in emotion, passion and feeling and rational, logical capacity. Because adults often dwell in the past or live in the future the present moment passes us by.

So, the first point today is to call our attention to the first word of our 2020 Giving Campaign – Now. Before it means an annual campaign for current needs; it means recognizing the wonder and gift of this moment, this now. And then responding. Praising God like those frolicking horses, just as the psalm today calls upon all living creatures to do.

Part II: the other half of the theme -- Ever. When we heard the psalm today the word "forever" was repeated. I will praise your name forever and ever; extol your name forever and ever.

One generation will commend your works to another; says the psalmist, they will tell of your mighty acts.; they will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty; and of your wonderful works.

Did you notice, the shift from now to ever? It's a seamless transition. If we catch on to how precious and holy each passing moment is our lives become one continual act of praise. And naturally we want our children to learn who this God is so that they too can appreciate the wonder of it all.

But because we're human and get distracted or lured away from being in the moment; our lives look more like a dotted or broken line of praise. Just like the goal of AA is to make periods of sobriety longer, the goal of the Christian life is to make the times when we are consciously grateful to God longer, and never lose sight of the source of life.

That's the second point. Let me repeat it. The psalm charges those who are grateful for their lives to tell of the glory and splendor of the Creator so that every new generation will learn to live the faith and pass it on.

The psalmist wrote his song to praise God and pass on this legacy because he and his people had just returned from Babylonian exile. He doesn't take anything for granted: now that they are back they have to rebuild the Temple that was destroyed by the Babylonian invasion; they have to reestablish the nation as a holy nation; as the nation God wanted them to be in first place, before Israel wanted to be like all the other nations, before she wanted to worship all the other gods and have her place in the sun.

You might say we are rebuilding our temple with our Ever campaign, but before Ever means the capital needs of the campus and our mission to the East Side it means, in the larger sense, passing on the legacy of faith to the next generation.

Christian faith – any of the great religions – is only ever one generation away from extinction. That's what Ever means; it means giving our faith and trust in God away to the next generation so that they will likewise pass on what they learned from us to the generation after them and so on. That's how the faith got to us, that's how it will get to future generations.

We have this inheritance in Christ, Paul writes to the Ephesians. We were destined by God to honor God's glory. We have inherited riches beyond our imagination, the Apostle says, so go, tell the world!

My parents never worried about whether I would grow up Christian, nor, I'll bet did yours. Christianity was the only game in town. It was taken for granted that I and my sisters would attend confirmation class and become followers of Jesus and members of the church. It was the rare kid in the neighborhood who did not.

And being a Christian merged with being an American. American Christians represented the ultimate triumph of Christianity from what it was in antiquity battling the culture and the Roman empire; and what it became – the state religion from Constantinople to Washington DC.

It is remarkable that no one thinks this way today. No one thinks that by being born in North America that anyone will grow up Christian. Being Christian is no longer (if it ever really was) normal, natural, or typical.

What is more striking is that this seismic shift has occurred in a single generation. Christianity, having thought of itself as the majority, established faith of our culture, is no longer dominant, not completely disestablished in some places but definitely moving toward the margins.

We are more cognizant today that Christians are made, not born, that baptism is the initiation into a counter-culture community of spiritual and moral formation that finds expression in the church. In a place like Westminster.

Fifty years ago the church didn't need to worry about passing on its faith in a world that took for granted that it was essentially Christian. Today we are in a dramatically changed situation.

Part III: Now and Ever isn't just a theme for two campaigns; it is a biblical mandate. So what exactly is it we are passing on when we tell the next generation the glorious splendor of God's wonderful works? Yes, we are telling our children how God made the world and how you can see God in the beauty of nature. We're reminding them that God is love and that those who abide in God abide in love and God abides in them.

But we are also told to tell the story of Jesus to the ends of the earth; that his life and ministry and his death and resurrection is the culmination of everything God has done, is doing and intends to do for the human family.

For Christians passing on our faith to the next generation means passing on this good news. We have the joy of offering people a new way of life. Conversion to Christ-like values and living is a process of letting go of the grip of the culture on our thinking and behavior; that's what Luke is up to; showing us how much we have to gain when we let go of the world.

The story of Zacchaeus illustrates this. When Jesus sees Zacchaeus and tells him to come down from the tree because he intends to go to Zacchaeus' house for dinner, the town is scandalized.

Here comes the Son of Man into their little town and rather than singing the praises of the good citizens of Jericho Jesus chooses to eat and fraternize with the biggest, double dealing crook in the city – Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector but the *chief of the tax collectors*. Tax collectors exacted tax from their own people to pay the Romans for their occupation government; and the tax collectors, in turn, got to keep any surplus cash. They were regarded as traitors and extortionists.

You can imagine the scandal this caused. But it is not the first time Jesus has scandalized the presumed righteous by his interaction with the riff raff, the debauched and those society shunned.

That's essentially who he is. He seeks out the lost, the marginalized, the leper, the prostitute, the orphan and widow, the demented, and breaks bread with them, hangs out with them, tells them they are children of God and that they are made well because of their own faith in the promises of God.

That's what we're passing on when we pass on the faith to the next generation – a God whose love has no limits, who accepts us just as we are, who gives us a second chance when we've been distracted by the glitter of the world and our own egos, when we've failed to be in the moment and lost sight of the gift of life.

What I'm saying is that living in the moment, praising God, passing on the legacy of the wonder and gift of life to the next generation is the other side of the coin of telling the story of Jesus and the God of second chances.

So often it is the frolicking horses or the child holding up the acorn that wakes us up from our slumber, opens our eyes and our awareness of how precious this existence is.

Just like our granddaughter Eliza who wanted me to experience that miraculous acorn; you feel compelled to share this wondrous news of how amazing not just the world but the God who made it is.

But we are also wakened from our slumber like those residents of Jericho when through some second chance the church extends its hand to help those who are pushed aside and left out. It's the same God who made all of this who wants all of us, all of us, to experience the love that brought all of this into being.

If a 1500 lb horse, a three-year old child and a repentant tax collector can praise God and the gift of life can't we?

There's a wonderful opportunity for each of us to do so – it's called the Now and Ever campaign. Amen.