

October 29, 2017 • Faith in Action Sunday

“Say Yes!”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



The Psalm 90

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;

in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.

The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!

Thank you, Ethan and Matt, for your wonderful reading from Psalm 90. Read by father and son, I hope these words jumped out at you: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations...Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart...Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to your children.”

Our God is an everlasting God whose love carries us, protects us, fills us, gives us life, from generation to generation. Just a week ago yesterday we were here for the wondrous baptism of Amelia Grace English. This morning we are writing names of dear departed saints on white ribbons as part of next Sunday’s All Saints commemoration. Week to week, this is the flow of church life and of our own lives--births and deaths, baptisms and memorial services. For all generations, God has been our home.

We heard this flow in last week’s Laity Sunday service as well. Candace Johnson’s story weaves through her birth family—how wonderful to have her parents worshipping with us last week—family that now includes her husband, Tony, and their children Augie and Blythe, and this, their church family. Witney Seibold spoke of this congregation being a church home for his grandmother, mother and father, aunt and uncle, his sister, and now including his wife, Angie, and their three-year old son, Henry. God has been our dwelling place in all generations. Do we not stand in awe and wonder as we remember God’s faithfulness and all God’s blessings from generation to generation?

This remembrance and affirmation of God’s constancy comes as a great gift, especially in times of “fightings without and fears within” as the hymn says. When we feel besieged and beleaguered by challenges and loss in our personal lives—illness, the death of a loved one, economic uncertainty...

when we feel overwhelmed by wars and rumors of war, cataclysmic natural disasters and the like.... well, as one commentator put it this week, “I can hardly remember for whom to pray.”

She goes on to observe that day-to-day we frame things in terms of stability and constancy, on the familiarity of our daily routines however stressful and challenging even that can be. Natural calamities, remind us of our vulnerability, of the unpredictability of so many things. “The only actual control or choice we have,” she concludes, “is to take care of one another,” praying “God, please show me what I can do to help today. To help folks who are suffering. To help our hearts heal.”

This is about “stewardship of the neighborhood” as we discussed last week in our Book Study. Remembering that we are all children of God who is from everlasting to everlasting. Remembering that life is not so much about “me” as about “we.” That we can always choose to take care of one another. That the values and faith we learned from our parents and grandparents, if we were so fortunate, are the values and faith we pass on to our children and succeeding generations.

It’s about saying YES to the God who is ever faithful, who says YES to us over and over and over and over again. And saying YES in our choices to do all we can impart and pass on that which is right and good and true. Saying “YES, God. I will try. I will do my best to keep you in the center of my heart and mind. And I will do all I can within my sphere of influence to share your love with others.”

We are quite intentional, in this congregation, about teaching our children about God’s love for them and about how giving to others is an essential part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Our children learn this as every week they bring forward their offering and place it in the offering baskets. They’re learning and practicing it this morning as we speak on this Faith in Action Sunday. They’re making snacks for pets in shelters. I thought Tricia—now Guerrero---was pretty brave to take on this project. They’re making dog biscuits out of peanut butter which seems potentially dangerous to me. But a couple of our youth have done this and swear it works. I’m eager to hear how this turns out.

Generosity, giving back, making our fair share contribution---as parents know, these are not traits that necessarily come automatically to little ones. And we might add, or to those of us bigger, older disciples either. We have to learn. We have to practice. We have to re-shape the framework in our heads from one of selfishness to one of joyful generosity. We’ve got to learn to remember that the

stewardship of the neighborhood is our calling as disciples. A way of saying YES to God's amazing grace and abundant love in our own lives poured out for the well-being of all.

A friend of mine told me about a conversation she'd overheard between her two grandsons, ages 7 and 4. Of course, the older brother likes to always be smarter and wiser than his little brother. When the little brother received a gift of some money for his birthday, his older brother told him that he needed to share some of it. When the little boy didn't get it, his brother told him about a baseball player they both admire who had sent some of his money to charity. The little brother looked at him very seriously and asked: "How far away is charity?"

Great question. Ask yourself this morning, how far away is charity from where you are now? We're into Week Two of our annual financial stewardship campaign and you should have received a letter, theme magnet, and pledge card in the mail this week. If not, grab a pledge card in front of you in the pew rack.

We do this annually because we all need to ask ourselves on a regular basis where we are with our generosity and level of giving. We need to take stock of our spiritual health and ask if we've moved any closer to charity this year? How is God calling is to grow?

The amounts we give will differ widely. But the sincerity of heart is what grounds it all. Am I giving a significant amount or a token? Have I stepped up? If you're giving when it occurs to you, step up and commit to a pledge. Say YES by making a regular pledge or increasing your existing pledge level. Get some skin in the game. If charity is still too far away from your heart, ask God to walk with you into new, deeper levels of faithfulness.

What will that giving provide for? There are the essentials we should not take for granted or assume that surely someone else's gift will make possible—salaries, light bills, internet, postage, coffee. And then there's our special focus to this year's campaign. There are seasons in the life of a congregation and this is a season of significant and vital growth in our ministries with children, youth, and families. Santa Monica First UMC has a long history of this, of course, and we build on all that has gone before.

As you read in the stewardship letter, for the last several years, we have been working hard to significantly revitalize those ministries, ministries that touch lives now and frame a bright future for the church and the faith we cherish. We are experiencing a season in the life of the congregation when everything seems to "click." We have launched Messy Church with an average attendance of 40, this monthly experience of worship and fellowship has become a much-loved opportunity for families to worship together and to build relationships of support and friendship.

Messy Church also provides an open door to worship for Preschool Families and families from Family Place, friends inviting friends, many experiencing church for the first time.

In Sunday morning Sanctuary worship, baptisms, weekly Children's messages and Sunday School, and monthly Children's Church and Faith in Action Sundays nurture spiritual formation and discipleship in our children and families through prayer, learning, music, and service.

Our youth group is strong and very active. Many of our youth and families, frazzled by crazy-busy schedules that fill weekdays and weekends as well, make Sunday night UMYF a priority. They are here. They bring friends from school. They worship, pray, sing, eat, have fun, support one another, and eagerly await their summer mission trip.

Their love for one another transcends whatever cliques and in/out groups they may experience at school. In UMYF, they simply embrace one another for who they are on their shared journey of faith.

We could add CAST, VBS, weekly Preschool Chapel, and the cross-over of families who come to other programs we host such as Scouts and Destination Science.

I am so excited and grateful to see first-hand how God is indeed doing a new thing in our midst. One Sunday morning after Coffee Hour, two families with young children wouldn't let me get away until they had shared their enthusiasm and appreciation for this wonderful congregation that nurtures their children and their family. "This is the perfect church for raising our kids," they insisted.

If you have any questions or want to hear more, ask Tricia, Robert, me, our lay leaders, or any of the families who led worship last Sunday. You'll get an earful. And your heart will be happy and your hope restored.

It's time for us all to Say Yes, step up and solidly undergird these ministries through our generous giving. Let's make sure that our giving reflects our deepest values and commitments.

It's really not that far to charity, for the path has been paved by the God who is from everlasting to everlasting, our dwelling place in all generations. When we open our hearts to God's leading, we hear God asking: "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

Yes, Lord. Yes we do! May your work be manifest to your servant and your glorious power to their children.

Thanks be to God!

Notes:

Amy Morris-Young. "Beneath a smooth surface, a bubbling fear and instability." October 21, 2017, National Catholic Reporter.

Jessica Tate. Feasting on the Word Year A Vol. 4. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

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