

How to Begin a New Year and a New Decade

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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How to begin a New Year and New Decade? How about this: with two vital spiritual qualities: Trust and Wonder.

The first title of this sermon, as I was planning it awhile back, was “The Grace of Doing Nothing”—a kind of “Anti-New Year’s Resolutions” sermon, not that we don’t a few every year, but there is a deeper message God may have for us as we enter 2020, and it circles around Trust and Wonder.

I

Psalm 46 underlines the meaning of trust with the words:

God is our refuge and our strength
a very present help in time of trouble.

Therefore we will not fear!

It is a call to trust in the goodness and power of God.

On the Sunday after 9/11 churches across the nation read this psalm and sang Martin Luther’s great hymn based on this psalm: “A Mighty Fortress is Our

God.” In a time of falling towers and the sudden ending of 3,000 lives we needed to hear these words and sing this song.

This psalm and this hymn, however were not a call to arms, but a call to trust in a power and a goodness greater than ourselves. And it gives us today, who sometimes trust too much in ourselves, “the grace of doing nothing.”

Let’s take “New Year’s Resolutions” for example. We fly into a flurry of self-improvement campaigns. We buckle up our will-power and gird our loins with self-control! And so much of it is about being productive. We are tempted to measure our life on what is measurable: inches, pounds, dollars, balance sheets and bottom lines. But what if we based our lives more on what is not measurable? Things of the spirit? It may rearrange our resolutions. We may discover “the grace of doing nothing.”

Or what about this: we have this mania to fix things and fix people, especially in the way we think they need to be fixed! God may have some other plans. Let’s let God have some room to work.

We rush to bend life to our own will, as nations rush to bend history to their own will, principally through the exertion of military power. We have not stopped being at war since 9/11. What folly. We need to practice “the grace of doing nothing”.

II

This is the surprising message of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and our strength.” *God* is! “Fear not then”, says the Psalmist, though everything be shaken. The Psalmist pictures ecological upheaval—mountains shaking, seas in uproar—and political turmoil, the tottering of nations. Like the character in the play *Green Pastures*, who says, “Lord, everything that was nailed down is coming loose.”

In such a time when it feels like everything is off-kilter and the center does not hold, we are called to the spiritual quality of trust, our best antidote to fear.

The psalmist applies his message to the realm of history and nations:

God makes the wars cease

breaks the bow

shatters the spear

The here come the famous words:

Be still and know that I am God

Literally, the Hebrew says, “Let your hands grow slack.” Drop your bows and spears, and know that I am God.

The first level of trust here is to stop trusting in your own might, your own strength, whatever that may be, to save you. God is your savior.

A second level of meaning is psychological and spiritual. Stop trying to defend yourself! God is your refuge and strength. We spend so much mental and emotional energy trying to defend ourselves, prove we are right, justify our actions. Let God defend what needs defending. The prayer of confession in Sunday worship is what I call the movement of the “undefended self.” We let down our defenses, we come to God in true honesty. We begin to let God heal what needs to be healed. Armored hearts become open to the mercy and help of God.

A third layer of this truth is about the quieting of your mind and heart, a stillness that heals the soul. Be still. Let your body, mind and spirit be at rest.

At Laity Lodge, a retreat center in Texas they have what they call a “Quiet House”, a small cabin where you can go for a few days, be quiet and alone. I’ve told you about the framed embroidered words on the wall as you enter:

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be.

Gordon Cosby often reminded people: We are human *beings*, not human *doings*. So we need somedays, “the grace of doing nothing”.

Psalm 147:10 says: God “does not take pleasure in the legs of a man.” I think of that verse when I see some of you guys wearing shorts to church! But the real meaning of the verse is that God takes no pleasure in our reliance on our own human strength. Our legs can take us just so far!

In “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” we hear these words:

Did we in our own strength confide
our striving would be losing.

Somedays we need to get our sticky fingers off our world. So let’s begin the year with this gift: “The grace of doing nothing.” The biblical word for it is “Trust”.

III

The second spiritual quality we can carry into the new year and decade is “Wonder”. Wonder as having new eyes to see God’s amazing world. As one has said, “There is no lack of wonders in the world, only a lack of wonderment.”

It is also the wonder that sees the new things God is doing. In our Revelation text the God who made the heavens and the earth and is always trying to bring them together says, “Behold, I make all things new!” This world is not a closed system. Be open to surprise. As C.S. Lewis said, “The signature of grace is surprise.”

I love a charming little book by science fiction master Ray Bradbury. It is entitled *Dandelion Wine*, and it tells of a summer in the life of a boy named Douglas, the summer of 1928, and it comes out of Bradbury’s memories of growing up in Waukegan, Illinois in the 1920’s.

The story begins with Douglas helping his grandfather make dandelion wine. They cut the golden harvest of flowers and brought them into the cellar. Then they dipped the cold pure water out of the rain barrels and brought it in and made the summer supply of what Douglas called “golden bottled goodness”. “Like summer on the tongue”, he said.

The summer rituals began for Douglas when the winter’s snow and ice melted and he could take off his heavy sodden winter boots and go shopping for his new summer’s pair of tennis shoes. Shoes like these, Douglas said, “could jump you over trees and rivers and houses. And if you wanted, they could jump you over fences and sidewalks and dogs”. When he got to the shoe store, Mr. Sanderson had already picked out just the right new shoes for him, the same ones

Douglas had been looking at in the store window for weeks: “*The Royal Cream-Sponge Para Litefoot Tennis Shoes*”. Douglas put them on, rocked back and forth in them to make sure they fit, then shot out of the store in joy.¹

Do you remember days like that?

V

One early day of summer Douglas took a Ticonderoga pencil and a new tablet of fresh paper and tried something new. He showed his friend Tom what he was doing.

He took his pencil and tablet and drew a line down the middle of the first page. At the top of the left side of the page he wrote: “Rites and Ceremonies.” At the top of the right column he wrote: “Revelations and Discoveries.”

“Rites and Ceremonies”, he told Tom, were the things we do every summer, like making dandelion wine and the first fireworks of the summer and the first root beer pop and the first day running barefoot outside on the grass.

The “Discoveries and Revelations” were the things we do for the first time, the new discoveries we make, the new realizations about life. For example, under “Rites and Ceremonies” was making dandelion wine. And under “Discoveries and Revelations” he wrote: “Everytime you bottle it, you got a whole chunk of 1928 put away, safe.”

Under “Rites and Ceremonies”, he put: “First argument and licking of the summer of 1928 by Dad, morning of June 24.” And under “Discoveries and Revelations” he wrote, “The reason why grown ups and kids fight is because they belong to different races.”

I thought as I read, what a wonderful way to begin a new year and new decade! What would you put under “Rites and Ceremonies”? Anniversaries and birthdays. Your personal “memorial days” when you remember those whom you have lost who have filled your life with love. Or the annual trip to the beach or mountains. Or Sunday worship, which would be on mine even if I didn’t get paid for it!

Think about the Christian Calendar and Church Calendar under “Rites and Ceremonies”. The Church year revolves around the life of Christ as the earth around the sun. What an amazing way to orient your life, your days and weeks.

It has already begun with Advent and Christmas. Today is the 12th Day of Christmas, Epiphany Eve. So under Rites and Ceremonies I put down these dates in my calendar for 2020:

January 6, Epiphany

February 26 Ash Wednesday

March 1 The First Sunday of Lent

April 7 Palm Sunday

April 12 Easter Sunday

May 31 Pentecost

June 7 Grits and Grace and our Season of Grace

November 1 All Saints Sunday

November 25 Our Thanksgiving Eve Interfaith Service

And then we begin anew: November 29, the first Sunday of Advent, as our lives begin a new journey around the sun—and around the life of God’s own son.

What about “Discoveries and Revelations”? What first time thing would you like to do this year? Something that would nourish your spirit and enrich your life, something you’ve always wanted to do?

And what about the quality of *wonder* that is openness to surprise? And what new thing God may do this year in your life? Our life? Are you surpriseable?

Start an inventory of wonders! Write them down. Sometimes science leads me into wonder. Albert Einstein wrote:

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and cannot wonder, no longer feels amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.

Scientist John Leslie asks this question: What are the odds that the physical universe would produce on its own the exact conditions to bring forth conscious life on this planet? He calculates it as about the same as having a fishing pole which can only accept a fish 23.2576 inches long, and that upon casting this rod in a lake you catch the exact fish as soon as your bait hits the water.² We might conclude it is all blind chance, or it might open our hearts to *wonder*.

John Polkinghorne, a British physicist and theologian has described with wonder his own belief this way:

...that there is a divine purpose behind this fruitful universe, whose 15 billion year history has turned a ball of energy into the home of saints and scientists.³

Might 2020 be for you, for us a year of radical amazement, a year of wonder and trust? Let's give it a try!

1. Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine* (N.Y.: William Morrow, 1975_, pp.13-27.

2. Cited in John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in the Age of Science*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)

3. *Ibid*, p.9.