

# **The Eternal Is Now**

**Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller**

**All Souls  
Unitarian Universalist Church  
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7-22-07 “the eternal is Now”

## Psalm 90

O life and existence, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or the earth and the world had formed from everlasting to everlasting you are.

You turn us back to dust. For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past.

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 those we are consumed by your presence. Existence you are simply overwhelming. We have set our iniquities before you; our secrets are held in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away in awe before you, and our years come to an end like a sigh.

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

Who considers the power and mystery of existence? You are great and awe inspiring. Have compassion on us who live within you.

## Sermon

It is not easy to say what a Unitarian Universalist believes. What we believe is probably not the right question, because we do not believe one thing, but share in common our freedom of belief, but each of us in our movement is a Unitarian Universalist. So, sharing our own beliefs is an example of that freedom. I cannot speak for the movement, but I can share my beliefs and the beliefs of other UUs. So, I share my beliefs and my response to one of the great Unitarian Universalist philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

I am not interested in selling eternity insurance. I do not believe if you give more money to your church that you can buy your way into heaven. I do not find the idea of the immortality of the soul, in the conventional and literal sense, to be comforting. The idea that God would send people from the horrors of this life to an existence of infinite horror, because they did not swear allegiance to Jesus as their personal savior, makes of God a monster. The idea of Hell seems improbable and obscene. The idea that my individual consciousness will exist for all time as an on-going and continuous presence seems unlikely to me and like so much egotism, I believe that most ideas about an after life are a longing for some kind of justice in a world that is so often unfair. People who suffer must surely receive some kind of relief, if only in the here after, seems like so much wishful thinking. It is certainly a longing for at least some kind of cosmic justice.

I do not worry about God as a Cosmic Peeping Tom. I laugh at the idea that there is somewhere a celestial cast of characters watching over my every move with a smite button or

a remote control switch that will open the pearly gates or a booby-hatch that will drop me into the fiery furnaces or the literal enactment of Dante's imagination.

But, I do believe in the legacy of Time. I do find comfort in the Eternal Moment. I do believe that Being and Becoming do really exist. I do believe that we are here now and are not in some kind of illusion or the result of some kind of shared imagination. I do believe in the mystery of Existence, in the reality of each day. And these beliefs comfort me.

Scripture puts it this way.

*God said to Moses, "Moses, Moses. I am that I am. I am here. I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cries. I know their suffering. I have come to deliver them." EX 3-8. I am the first and the last. Issaiha 44:6. I am with you always, Mathew28:20. I am the word. I am the light. I am the light of the world. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the Alpha and the Omega. I am that I am.*

There are some members of our faith tradition who have rejected God. I understand this reluctance to accept the anthropomorphic "Big Noba-Daddy in the Sky." But, once we have rejected this traditional God, once we have rejected a conventional understanding of an after life, what comes next? This is where the real work and the real fun of religion begins.

One of the purposes of religion is to comfort the afflicted, to help us make our worlds more whole. If we have rejected a super natural theology, can we find comfort in a naturalistic way of thinking. I believe so.

Year after year I do memorial services for members and friends of our faith. I hear people say that their beloved family member or friend will be committed to the preciousness of sacred memory. Yes, I do believe this. Yes, the memories of

those we love do live in us, and as long as we live and remember that love, that love and they do still exist in us. But, we are just a blink in time. Memories fade and people pass.

Last year, I had the good fortune to spend a week visiting my cousin and his wife in St. Louis. One evening, I took time off from my business meetings that had taken me over to St. Louis. My cousin and his wife fixed a fancy dinner and I spent the evening with me remembering our relatives, many of whom have died but who we remembered fondly. Then my cousin took out old family albums. We knew some of the people in the photo album, but then he had an album from our Great-grandparents. It was filled with pictures of our ancestors, but there were no names attached to any of the pictures. If they had been labeled, if our Grandparents had just taken time to tell us stories from their memories or from family lore, maybe they might still have had some substance left in this life, but really all but nothing was left.

What do we leave behind? And is that leaving any kind of legacy or any kind of true immortality? Are memories enough of a legacy?

In mid-life one of the questions, I understand that people often consider is the kind of legacy they are creating. It is a part of one's life integration. Our legacy, the wake of our lives is a kind of immortality, even though it is a bit fleeting. I realize that many in this church range from early to late mid-life, and that this question may not just be my own, but all of ours to some extent. What is the legacy we are leaving behind us? And given global warming and human survival in question, this is not a causal drawn question, in fact.

I think of churches that I have helped build. Communities I have helped and harmed. I think of how ephemeral is an

increase in membership, or an increase in staffing or budget in a church. It can change so quickly. Does it have any substance? Any real legacy? Building a new building or adding to an existing building may last longer, decades, even generations, but even these can pass so quickly. In a few generations a new building is needed, a different location desired and the gift of a building becomes like so much shifting sand. In one hundred years maybe it will still be here, and in a few hundred, few buildings remain as they were. What endures?

Let us shift gears for a moment and put these questions in broader or theological context so that we can ask them again and maybe find a different vantage point.

For Charles Hartshorne God is not a being, but a becoming. God is not an entity but a process or an event, of which we are a part, experiencing and co-creating as a part of this overall process of life and existence in its becoming and in our becoming. God is the name for the event called existence. In this sense God is an event. God is not a Being, but God is all that has been and is becoming. This is called pantheism or panentheism. God is everything.

Yet, from Process prospective there is no immortality, because everything is changing constantly. For example, which of the many events, that has been who you are, is the immortal or eternal one that will last forever? What is truly you and which of the “you-s” that have been you is the one that is to be preserved? For in the next moment you are a new you and the old event that was you is already substantially gone. Process thinking rejects the subjective immortality and instead suggests an objective eternity that is the moment, which exists in time and in the totality of Being-and-Becoming.

Hartshorne writes, “In reality we can never be less than we have been! What in us is extremely partial, feeble retention of the past – may in God be complete, ideally vivid and adequate and fully retained.” OOTM p 34.

In a letter to John Kennedy he wrote this, “Immortality – I have no interest in a continuation of my sequence of experience after death, but an objective immortality within divine inclusion/prehension seems appropriate for us humans.” What he suggests is that once an experience has occurred it exists in the totality of being and becoming. Once it has occurred it has occurred for all time and is held in time as an occurrence within existence.

Yes, in this sense beauty, virtue and goodness are their own rewards. Because once the beauty has occurred then it did and does exist and continue to be a testament to its own existence, at least this is true from the Process perspective. I am not entirely sure whether I agree, but I like the logic of it and I find it comforting.

The creation of a worship service or the offering of oratory, preaching or a speech offered to the public goes by so quickly, at least for some of us. When it is really good, there is a kind of letting go and time moves faster, there is more energy and then it is gone. When it has been a really good Sunday, then I want an instant replay. I want to rewind it and run it again, just like it was, but there is never another just like it was. So, I let go knowing that whatever it was is gone, for better or for worse. Usually that it happened at all is enough. Virtue and beauty are their own rewards, but what if in the infinitely eternity of God all that has been is held and remembered, or as Hartshorne says, “Prehended?”

Then when the music is good, when it is very good, it is forever, maybe? When things are bad, they are bad forever. In this sense wrong, sin and evil are their own punishment as well. Or as a friend once said, “I do not condemn those who have affairs; the pain of their experience is punishment enough.” The wrong and the right lasting for all time in time is Hartshorne’s idea of immortality. The Now is Eternal.

There are members of our church who quietly go around doing good. I think of the grace that is offered so often, when the Demeters host a reception after a memorial service. It is so simple, just cookies, punch and coffee offered to the grieving with a smile. It’s not much; it’s nothing really, but grace and service, as the families are held and cared for. So often the family doesn’t even realize that it is happening, that they are being loved. Virtue and goodness are their own rewards, and if this is what is held in the memory of God as an eternal moment, then I believe it is good.

I know that Jack Phillips keeps showing up on Friday and sometimes on Saturday and rebuilds another part of the sound system. He quietly does it when no one is watching. He doesn’t do it to be thanked. He does it as a gift to his community. It seems good to me.

I know that David Hakan offers wonderful services for the soul, often with original music. He offers where there are twenty people in attendance or three. He does this week after week and has done so for years.

I like the idea that there is a wake that reverberates across time and will do so as long as time and existence last. What a gift is it to give to life a cascade of beauty, joy and goodness? I think this is a good idea, a great legacy. And do not think it matters whether anyone knows it was us who did it. I do not

think it matters whether I am there to be remembered consciously, by me or by anyone, but that it existed once and forever is enough. God's judgment is the legacy of our own behaviors.

When I met Charles Hartshorne, he was in his late nineties and still as bright as ever. I had the great good fortune to hear him lecture, to meet him, to sit in worship in a UU church with him and to visit with him personally for a few minutes. These are cherished memories of beauty and mutual creation.

When we visited, I knew his theology and his history. He was a renowned naturalist and ornithologist, as well as theologian and philosopher. So, I shared with him one of the most beautiful moments of my life and my memory of it. I shared with him the story of the day I fell in love with my wife. I tell this as an example of all of our lives, of the special moments we each have. Sharing it with Dr. Hartshorne was one of those moments, too.

My wife and I took an evening picnic to an area lake. After our picnic dinner, we walked along a lake trail. Much to my delight we saw lots of birds, but of particular note were the flocks of Blue birds that seemed to swarm around us the entire evening. I felt as if God as saying "yes." It was so beautiful, and the beauty was certainly its own kind of "yes," and there was our joy and it too was telling me "yes", "Yes, Yes!"

When I told him, a tear came to his eye and he staggered and needed to be steadied. We smiled. He thanked me for the story and I thanked him for his remarkable thinking and writing. I will always remember visiting with him, and maybe this memory will be held in the memory of time, too. If so, it is good, and to think so comforts me.

May your memories and actions be worthy of Life's remember and holding them for all time. This is my prayer and may it be our practice.

### Closing Words

May you know your own goodness. May that goodness and virtue be its own reward. May you have compassion enough to accept the harm you have caused. Know that each moment is an invitation into the infinite mystery of that which is Becoming and into all that is yet to be. Our choices are our prayers. Our lives are our expressions of truth. May we be worthy of what we choose to leave in our wake.

### First Reading

#### Immortality

It is eternity now.  
I am in the midst of it.

It is about me, in the sunshine;  
I a in it, as the butterfly in the  
light-laden air.

Nothing has to come,  
It is now.

Now is eternity,  
Now is the immortal life.

## Second Reading

### A Natural Theology For Our Time

By: Charles Hartshorne

A dubious side of the New Testament, as it has actually affected religious life, is the immense stimulus it gave, partly through Paul's speculations, to the idea that our chief concern should be over what happens to us after death. Here, the influence of Plato was not exactly helpful. The conception of an immortal soul, imprisoned in the body, and with its earthly career but an incident in its ultimate destiny, is Platonism not at its best; it exhibits the partly life-hating and life-fearing Plato, who is tempted to think of providence as an extension of our earthly legal codes. The wicked must face a reckoning more adequate than they usually find in this life, and the good must have something better to expect than any rewards that fickle fortune and fickle human opinion are likely to bestow upon them. But all arguments for personal immortality, as most philosophers and theologians have conceived this, seem to me fallacious and I include ethical and religious arguments.

Perhaps I have a blind spot in this region, but I see no need for post-terrestrial rewards or punishments – beyond the satisfaction, to be achieved now, of feeling one's earthly actuality indestructibly, definitively, appropriated in the divine participation. If, or insofar as, punishments or rewards are necessary to secure good behavior, our human laws, magistrates, and institutions should if possible be shaped to provide them in this life. But that God has to guide and inspire the world by these none too efficient means I cannot believe.

Connected with this point, I incline to look to the Buddhists in one way, and to the Jews of the Old Testament, in another way, as counterbalance to such horrible examples as Dante. I agree with Buddhism that, strictly speaking, a person is a new entity each moment, so that the person who wants to wake up in heaven to begin a further life is not asking for the present actuality to be preserved from death. That actuality is already largely gone the next moment – unless God is preserving its full flavor forever. But then perhaps no further immortality is needed? The Jew who served God without asking for post-mortem rewards, or worrying about post-mortem punishments, was to my mind eminently sound.