

Sermon 22.08.28

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CALL TO WORSHIP/SCRIPTURE INTRO

Are you starting to feel it? The change? In weather - maybe in routines in your household. The seasons are changing once again.

Seasons can vary in length. Seasons of our lives (years), seasons of the year (months), seasons of emotions (fleeting - come and go throughout a day). There is a movement - not linear, but more circular, spiral, dance like.

Some seasons are predictable (though always changing) - growth of our children, with expectation that they will leave home. Milestones of babies, taking those first tentative steps, of losing teeth, of starting school, seasons of the garden, expecting the first frost...

Other seasons are harder to see the end - an emotional depression, a time of growth (stock market), grief, illness, falling in love. Some we take for granted - a strong back, healthy body, thinking that season is unchanging.

Hard to see a season when we're in it. The uncertainty of when it will end can lead to fear or complacency.

Today, those born into a Western intellectual tradition tend to view time as linear.

A season, a life, has a beginning and an end.

In so much of how we understand the world, time is bookended by two discrete points.

Everything exists along a line with "before" at one end and "after" at the other.

In the natural world, there's not much that points toward linear time. Day in and day out, the sun rises and sinks below the horizon. Winter passes and comes back around with icy regularity.

The Maya and Inca mythologies featured cyclical and never-ending stories. In India, the "wheel of time" sees the ages of the universe come around over and over again. The Greek

Stoics offered a version of “eternal recurrence” — where this world, and this reality, would come around again, exactly the same way. Sounds like the movie Groundhog day!

It was Plato who documented seeing time as a thing that had a “beginning”, who thought time was created by the Creator . Plato’s view was only one, and not necessarily a popular one. But, the early Christian Church Fathers loved Plato’s view. From the creation in Genesis to the Last Judgment in the book of Revelation, time can be mapped as linear.

But not all agreed with Plato -Time, as his student Aristotle suggested,
is the measure of change; the world is in a ceaseless process of change.”

The world changes. Seasons, long or short, come and go. We are changed.¹

We gather to worship a God who is both change and unchanging. The one who reminds us that everything, everything has a season. That there is a time for all matter under heaven.

¹ <https://bigthink.com/thinking/a-brief-history-of-linear-time/>

SERMON

'It's Time' the deep voice boomed. It's time! As people drew in, curious what this large man with a sonorous voice was talking about, he'd ask a passerby,

'Do you know what time it is?'

Do you know what time it is?

It's fudge makin' time!!!

I'm not a big fan of fudge, but that afternoon at the Market place in Baltimore's Inner Harbor, we stood and watched this man walk us through the process - stirring together the rich ingredients, then beating it with a wooden spoon until it was just the right consistency to pour into pans and set.

All these years later, I can still hear his voice, 'do you know what time it is?'

What time is it?

Everywhere we turn there is a clock, in this culture where time has become more valuable than money, we need to hear the Teacher's message concerning time and seasons.

Does time have a beginning and an end... or, do we understand time as more circular, or spiral, returning again and again, but never quite the same?

Our poem this morning from the book of Ecclesiastes, which was made famous by the Byrds song based on Pete Seeger's lyrics, reminds us that everything belongs.

There's something about it that touches us, rings true.

Before listening again to this poem, I want to give a little background to this somewhat enigmatic book.

It's hard for historians to pinpoint when it was written, but they all agree that the writing is set in an era of political and economic turmoil.... Wealth in this ancient economy could come and go quickly; justice was uncertain; the ordinary citizen was vulnerable to unstable power structures...

The audience for the book is likely a hardworking and possibly harassed group. Oppression and uncertainty all around them. They are likely of the middle class - not the poorest - but also not those in positions of great advantage.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a kind of philosophical notebook, containing reflections - observations that are stated and then considered from several points of view.

It asks big questions, right from the get go, the author says:
'All is vanity. What do people gain from all their toil?' (Ecc. 1: 2-3)

Vanity *-in Hebrew, Hevel* - translated as vanity, absurdity, or meaninglessness is literally 'breath', 'breeze', 'vapor'.

Hevel is fundamental to sustaining life despite the fact that it evaporates and dissipates. Vapor. Ephemeral, impossible to chase after.

All is *hevel*...all is breath...what do people gain from their toil?

Commentator Douglas B. Miller suggests that in the many paradoxes of this book, the Teacher, Qohelet (ko-HELL-it), invites readers to adopt open-hearted ways of responding to life's realities -

accepting one's divinely given portion in life;
cultivating community and generosity toward others;
pursuing wisdom as something that's both valuable and makes one vulnerable;
rethinking one's faith in order to revere God who is sovereign and mysterious.

In this way, the Teacher reminds us, humans can make the most of life before *'the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.'* (Eccl 12:7)²

So hear the words of this poem, embedded in the wrestlings of how to live in the midst of uncertainty and vulnerability.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

² Miller, Douglas B. 2010. Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes. Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA. PP 31-32

a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...

Everything has its season. The times we welcome and the seasons of life we dread. In psychological terms we might see this invitation as creating space for our shadow, those dark parts of ourselves that we deny and disown and the parts of ourselves that shine, but we don't necessarily claim. *God loves and welcomes all of us.*

These seasons of our lives - whether decades long - seasons of marriage, seasons of childhood and beyond... or seasons of uncertainty like illness and COVID, where we're not really sure when it might end, or what comes next.

Seasons of emotions that can be so fleeting - a moment of joy in seeing friends after a long absence, of savoring a piece of music, or the weight of a newborn in our arms... and emotional seasons of lethargy or depression that cling to us like overcooked spaghetti. Returning like clock work at certain times of the day, or year.

God loves and welcomes all of us.

This poem, found in the book of Ecclesiastes, and so much of our Holy Scripture, was written in a time of incredible upheaval - what must have felt like a cosmic change of season - of war, and displacement. Our gospels made their way to writing at the time of the tearing down of the temple. Seasons where the future was so uncertain!

Just as this ancient poem creates space for everything to have its time and season, so God welcomes all the parts of us.

Our seasons of suffering - of weeping, of mourning, of tearing and losing, of planting and seeking and finding - this poem, embedded in our ancient scripture, is reflected later in the teachings of Jesus.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12: 24)

Jesus lived his suffering and was created anew.
Jesus holds the mystery of beginning and end...
Of new life stepping out of the tomb of death.
Of seasons and cycles where life follows death.

New life springs forth in the most unexpected of places.

For everything there is a season. For everything.

There is a purpose for every matter under heaven.

As we live through our seasons - whether times of dancing or weeping -

May we hold onto the promise that in all seasons, Christ journeys with us.