

# A Time For Everything

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented January 1st, 2017,  
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13

I recall hearing years ago about a preacher who was admiringly regarded for always finishing his services right at noon. Then one Sunday, the impossible happened. He preached until 12:30. On the way out, one of his elders angrily inquired, "What happened to you?" The preacher answered, "For years I have always put a candy mint in my mouth as the service started, and I would tuck it away. It was always gone at exactly noon. That way, I never had to look at the clock or worry about what time it was. But this Sunday it didn't go away, and I finally realized I had put a button in my mouth."

Preachers are not the only ones who have to keep track of time. We all do. There are deadlines to meet, buses to catch, papers to be turned in. Calendars and clocks have become our masters in modern society. In his book *Time Wars*, Jeremy Rifkin writes that the idea of our lives and the events in them being controlled by blocks of allocated time is, in terms of centuries at least, a relatively new idea. The idea comes from the Benedictine monks, "whose passion for organizing and filling every minute of the day, grew out of St. Benedict's conviction that 'idleness is the enemy of the soul.'" Not until the 15th century did clocks begin to rival churches in the town squares of Europe. Not until the 17th century did those clocks have minute hands.<sup>(2)</sup> Surely much has been gained in terms of production and organization, but when life became divided and subdivided into seconds, minutes, and hours, many things were lost.

We experience those losses every day. Our distance from the natural rhythms of life keeps increasing. Hardly anything is really seasonal. You can get tomatoes, summer's most luscious offering, anytime of the year now, though where I live, the ones you buy in January are likely to have been shipped 1,000 miles and will taste like cardboard. We also live at an increasing distance from the ancient but timeless understanding that each day, each moment, is an unearned gift from a gracious God, rather than a commodity to be traded or spent for something else. As a new year begins, I think it is time to rethink time.

There was an ancient teacher of wisdom who was called in Hebrew Qohelet. The name in Greek is translated "Ecclesiastes." This wise person understood time quite differently from the way it is understood today. He wrote after the Babylonian Exile, an experience that had taught the Hebrew people that human experience was never going to be an uninterrupted walk in the park and that time should not be a tyrant that demanded all our allegiance. Some see Ecclesiastes as the ultimate cynic. There is some truth to that. Thirty-eight times throughout the course of the book entitled *Ecclesiastes*, the wisdom writer says, "All is vanity." I would call him more of a realist than a cynic, a practical theologian who refused to look at life through rose-colored glasses and wanted those to whom he spoke not to wear rose-colored glasses themselves.

Today's reading catalogs various seasons of life, 28 of them arranged in sharp contrast to one another and yet each an undeniable part of human existence. His list rings so true. It begins with what is most fundamentally true--that one day, we are born into this world, then, just as inevitably, our life in this world comes to an end. The French composer Hector Berlioz once remarked, "Time is a great teacher. Unfortunately, it kills all its pupils." Qohelet, Ecclesiastes, would've agreed, though he might have objected to the adverb "unfortunately." For him, things are the way they are, set in motion by God. The universe unfolds according to its own inner logic and set of seasons. Only God knows why existence is set up the way it is. In the face of an inscrutable world created by an inscrutable God, one should not waste energy railing against life; instead, Qohelet advises, "The best thing to do is to be happy and enjoy yourself for as long as you can." That is theological advice at its practical best. Since there are so many things over which we have no control, it is wise to be happy and to look for

joy. In addition to not worrying about what we can't control and enjoying the gifts God gives, Ecclesiastes' other prescription for life is that always and forever we are to stand in awe before God, from whose mighty acts, nothing can be added or taken away. God is the creator of time. God sets the rhythm of reality — *the time to mourn, the time to dance, the time to gather in and the time to let go.*

Knowing what time it is differentiates the foolish from the wise. Some hold on for dear life to that which is actually finished and done. Some refuse to let go of a relationship that has ceased to be nourishing. Others try to breathe life into, say, a church program that has been around for too long, but no one is brave enough to bury it. I have a friend who started a new church. That church came to life because a dying church in that community gathered one Sunday, gave thanks to God for the saints who had gone before them, for the years of faithful service they had been able to offer, then the members of that church walked out of the sanctuary, closed the door, sold the building along with the rest of their assets, gave the money to the Presbytery, and said, "Please use this to start a new church."

*There is a time to build up and a time to break down, a time to be born and a time to die.* Though the wisdom writer maintains there will be hatred and war in this world, don't think for a minute that he is condoning either. He is simply stating the fact. Let us not forget that Christ came into a world covered up with hatred and war, with injury and mourning. He came to show us the way to higher ground. He gives us directions to the peaceable kingdom, which God originally intended and which he has come to restore. *The kingdom of God is at hand,* Jesus announces. He came to defeat all that would separate us from God and from one another. Any time you and I sanction hatred in God's name, we are doing so in a way that is entirely antithetical to our faith tradition. I shudder when I hear some of the hateful rhetoric that permeates the public conversation in our nation today. Let us never sigh and say, "Well, that's just the way things are." *If there ever were a time to kill, now is the time to kill incivility and replace it with civility. If there ever were a time to sow seeds of reason, the time is now. We need to know what time it is.*

One day the Dalai Lama and an Indian psychoanalyst held a public dialogue on the subject of hatred. The psychoanalyst said that a healthy person should be able to hate and then to transcend hating. The Dalai Lama said that was not the Buddhist view. He told the story of a man who had been imprisoned in Tibet and tortured by the Chinese. After he was released, the man told the Dalai Lama that on two occasions, things had gotten really terrible in prison. Had he been close to death, the Dalai Lama asked. "No," the man responded. "Twice, I almost hated the Chinese." Jesus said, "Love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you." *This is the time, now is the time in our society, not to answer evil with evil, ugliness with ugliness. This is the time for the reconciling love of God to be released into the atmosphere afresh through you and me.* What time is it? I like the bumper sticker that reads, "Don't postpone joy." Ecclesiastes couldn't have said it better.

A copy of a Sanskrit poem written 2,000 years ago was given to me one Christmas by friends in the church that I served. The next year, their lives and the lives of a dozen of their family members were snuffed out in a terrible plane crash. Let me share that ancient poem with you. A copy of it hangs on my study wall, and I read it every day:

*"Listen to the salutation of the dawn... Look to this day, for it is the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and truth of existence: the joy of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power. For yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow a vision, but today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope."*

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, he said, "The time is fulfilled." When we hear that proclamation today, another "**now**" is created: **Now** is the moment of our salvation. This very moment, rich with divine possibility. Here we are on the frontier between the old order and the new order, where Jesus reigns. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Barth called his age the time of "great positive possibility." That is equally true *right now*. January, 2010, is filled, overflowing, with great divine possibility. No, the past is not completely finished and gone, but the truly new has come. Jesus knew all there was to know about time. He knew when his time had come to give his life. He knew whom to trust with his life, with his own coming and going. Ringing in my ears for weeks now has been that lovely verse from "O Little Town of Bethlehem":

*"Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light.  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."*

Christ **is** the turning point, the fulcrum of history.

I close with an ancient story, told by the wonderful author and spiritual leader Joan Chittister:

*"Where shall I look for enlightenment?" the disciple asked.  
"Here," the wise one said.  
"When will it happen?" the disciple asked.  
"It is happening right now," the wise one answered.  
"Then why don't I experience it?"  
"Because you don't look."  
"What should I look for?"  
"Nothing. Just look."  
"Look at what?"  
"At anything your eyes light on."  
"But must I look in a special way?"  
"No, the ordinary way will do."  
"But don't I always look the ordinary way?"  
"No, you don't."  
"But why ever not?"  
"Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else."*

Friends, the voice you have heard today is that of a harried parish pastor, but the words I have spoken are the wisdom of the ages.

*"For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. Yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow but a vision. But today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness, and every tomorrow, a vision of hope."*

**Let the people say, Amen.**