

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 (NRSV)

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

[2] a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

[3] a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

[4] a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

[5] a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

[6] a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

[7] a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

[8] a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

[9] What gain have the workers from their toil? [10] I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. [11] He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. [12] I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; [13] moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord [23] (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), [24] and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

[25] Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. [26] It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. [27]

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, [28] Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

[29] "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

[30] for my eyes have seen your salvation,

[31] which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

[32] a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

[33] And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. [34] Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed [35] so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

[36] There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, [37] then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. [38] At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

[39] When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. [40] The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

THE BEST LAID PLANS

One of the saddest funerals at which I have officiated was the funeral of a young man who was only in his second year of college. He had a t-top sports car and decided to do some racing with his friends. He lost control of the car, and since he wasn't wearing a seat belt, he was ejected through the roof. He died on the way to the hospital.

His parents were inconsolable. They didn't know what to say or do. But, at the last minute his mother wrote something to be read by one the ministers at

his funeral. She wrote about his plans for the future and his good qualities. But, her last line was one of despair. Being an English teacher she paraphrased Robert Burns, “the best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray.”

I had never appreciated the “bite” of that phrase until I heard it in the context of that boy’s funeral. The mother felt a profound sense of hopelessness in the face of her son’s death. Sometimes things don’t work out, and all we’re left with in the end is regret.

That’s basically the message we get from our Old Testament lesson for today. You may make your grand plans, but your plans are subject to change at any time. There are no certainties in life except death and taxes. Eat, drink and be merry because this day may be your last.

The Bible doesn’t tell us, but I suspect that the “preacher” of Ecclesiastes was an older man. He had seen people come and go. And looking back over his life and the lives of others, he now wanted share what he had learned. What were his pearls of wisdom after a lifetime of striving? It’s all meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Now, you may rightly ask, “Why is this book in the Bible? It is so discouraging. Why should we listen to a preacher who proclaims that everything is meaningless? Is not the point of church to be lifted up by some word of hope about the future?”

One commentator said that the book of Ecclesiastes is “a confession of disillusionment about life in general and the frustration of work in particular.”

But, despite the negative tone of this book, I think it has an important message for modern men and women. It’s a message we need to hear because it exposes an idolatry that is particularly prevalent in our community, the idea that we can save ourselves through hard work.

We live in an achievement-oriented society. We live in a society that has always encouraged hard work as a way to make dreams come true. But, the preacher of Ecclesiastes challenges this assumption. He suggests that those who have great and ambitious plans for success are ripe for disillusionment.

The best laid plans almost always go astray. No matter how successful we may be, all of us are only one tragedy away from discouragement and despair.

I was touched by the tragedy that befell Tony Dungy. He was the coach of the Indianapolis Colts. His team had the best record in pro football. Some even dreamed of an undefeated season. And yet within a few short weeks his teen age son had committed suicide and his whole family was in mourning. I couldn't help but think "the best laid plans ..."

TIME, THE EVER-ROLLING STREAM

And yet we go on making our plans as if we can control tomorrow. Even if we have the extreme good fortune not to have our plans do not go astray, at least not too often, time itself will soon defeat us. The preacher of Ecclesiastes suggests that we reconsider our outlook on life in light of our mortality.

He tells us that he tried it all. He built things. He gathered great harvests. He studied hard. Anything worth doing he did. (2:4-8)

And yet, as he looked back on all the effort, he realized that it would have no permanent impact. In the grand scheme of things, all his big plans and hard work will have been for nothing. From his perspective as an old man, it all seemed so pointless.

The next to last line of the hymn "Our God Our Help in Ages Past" summarizes the message of Ecclesiastes very well. It reads, "Time, like an ever rolling stream, soon bears us all away; we fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day."

I've been listening to a series of interviews on NPR entitled "The Long View." It's a show that attempts to help us understand our world from the perspective of famous persons who have lived a long time. Mike Wallace, the reporter from 60 Minutes was giving his perspective.

He said that he didn't like living out of the limelight. In his heyday he had the good fortune to travel all over the world and interview famous people, but now he couldn't make it through the afternoon without taking a nap! He avoids despair by continuing to work some and seeing a psychiatrist every six months for what he calls "a lube job."

Mike made his good friend Mel Brooks angry when he told him on his 75th birthday, "It's all downhill from here." If Mike doesn't sound like the preacher from Ecclesiastes, I don't know who does. But, like Mel Brooks we don't want to be bothered by the hard nosed realism of a Mike Wallace. We don't want to think about the fact that time like an "ever rolling stream" will bear us and our dreams away.

I, like many, much prefer the approach of a local news group that is doing a New Year special entitled, "New Year, New You." The idea of this program is one we do want to hear.

We're not getting older; we're just getting better. All we need is a little tweaking here and there. Perhaps a new diet and a new workout regime would help. Maybe if we ate more fish we would remember more, and so forth.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm all for a good diet and a healthy lifestyle. We can slow down the aging process a bit that way.

But, let's get real. Time does change things, and life is short. In my office I've got pictures of my family that were taken what seems like only a few short years ago. My children were little and my hair was dark. That's how I

still remember them sometimes, but one look at my children and another look in the mirror will dispel any notion that this is still true!

EMBRACING OUR MORTALITY

The Bible teaches us that we should not seek to deny the uncertainty or the brevity of life. Instead, we should embrace that hard fact. According to the Psalmist, our life span is limited and much of it is spent in “toil and trouble.” And in order to gain perspective on life, we need to meditate on that reality. The Psalmist wrote, “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” (Psalm 90:10, 12)

In some ways our New Year’s resolutions are attempts to deny the obvious. No matter how many exercise classes you attend, you’re not going to get into a size 4 ever again! No matter how much Rogaine you use, the hair is not going to grow back ... at least not on your head.

If we want a hope that lasts, we must look beyond what we can do and wait upon God’s timing. Instead of making our “best laid plans,” we should open ourselves to God’s leading at all times.

We want desperately to control certain areas of our life, our job, our health and our family. But, the simple fact is that they are out of our control. Our lives are in God’s hands, whether we acknowledge it or not.

I think that we talk about God’s will in much too glib a fashion at times. We act as if we are in control. In the New Testament letter of James we read this caution against presuming too much about life. James wrote,

James 4:13-15 (NRSV)

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." [14] Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. [15] Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

Do you already have a big portion of 2006 planned? My calendar fills up early, but I think we all need to put an asterisk beside each item on that calendar and a note at the bottom of the page, "Remember, all of these plans are subject to change due to Divine intervention."

Some people don't like to hear that. They are so busy planning their lives (and sometimes the lives of other people!) that the concept of having their plans derailed, even by the Almighty Himself, does not seem like good news at all.

And yet there is a certain comfort knowing that through we are like a mist that appears for just a while, that our lives are in the hands of the God who created heaven and earth. Though we are temporary, the God we serve is permanent.

There is great comfort in trusting our hopes and our lives to the eternal God who stands above and beyond the ravages of time.

In 2 Peter 3:8 that thought is expressed in this way, "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day."

A HEART FILLED WITH ETERNITY

In our better moments, perhaps, we do acknowledge the holy nature of our lives, the fact that in God we "live and move and have our being." All time is in God's hands.

The preacher of Ecclesiastes tells us that God has not only created this world and made everything beautiful in its time God has also put a sense of eternity in our hearts. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

And yet this sense of eternal knowledge is incomplete. We have this feeling that we were meant for something more, but God's will remains a mystery. It is something that we cannot find on our own.

But, our lack of understanding should not stop us from striving. On the contrary, we are encouraged by the preacher to give thanks and take pleasure in our daily work, realizing that God can use what we do and say in much greater ways than we can ever imagine.

This continues to be a great source of hope and encouragement for me in the work that I do. This past year I received an unexpected e mail from a lady in North Florida. She was trying to contact a lawyer in the Kissimmee area but was unexpectedly directed to our church's web site and to a sermon I had preached several years ago entitled, "Show Me the Money."

The sermon was about how all that we have belongs to God, and she said that this was exactly the message she needed to hear. She wrote, "I read the whole sermon and realized that this was God's message to me."

It's amazing. God can even use computer error to further His kingdom! And God can and will use all of us as we toil away in our little corner of the world.

That's what our second lesson from Luke teaches us. Two people toiling away in relative obscurity are given the opportunity to do something of eternal significance for the kingdom of God.

The first one was a man by the name of Simeon. The Bible describes him as righteous and devout. And though he was old, he still looked forward to the future because he believed that before he died, God was going to show him something special.

Simeon believed that history was going somewhere, that God had a plan for his life and for the world. Even his latter days were filled with meaning and a

sense of expectation. Life for him was lived on tiptoe, straining to see what God would reveal.

And Simeon's watchfulness was not disappointed. When he saw the child, Jesus, he took him in his arms and said in effect, "Now I can die in peace. I have seen the future in this child, God's child. He will bring God's salvation not only to our country but to the whole world."

Simeon was an old man, but he was not depressed about the future. God's Spirit helped him see a vision of a greater future, a greater salvation.

The same was true for someone else in the temple. Her name was Anna.

Anna's story was a tragic one. She was married, but her husband died after only seven years of marriage, leaving her a widow at an early age. The Bible tells us that she never left the temple after that tragedy. Instead she prayed night and day until she was eighty four years of age.

The people said she was a prophetess. And in the child, Jesus, Anna also saw something special. She saw the future, God's future. She began praising God and said that this child was definitely the one for whom the people were waiting. Redemption was drawing near to Jerusalem.

Simeon and Anna lacked much of what our world values. They were not young. In the case of Anna there was no family. And yet they were able to look forward to the coming year with a sense of hope and expectation. Why?

They believed that it was AD, anno domini; they believed it was the year of our Lord. They believed that God was doing something great in the child Jesus. They were able to trust in the goodness and salvation of an eternal and Almighty God even when they were on their last legs and didn't have all the facts.

TRUSTING GOD IN THE NEW YEAR

I mentioned Tony Dungy and the tragedy that befell his family this past week. Tony spoke to reporters after the funeral for his son, and said, “We are grateful for the years that we had with my son. And we are grateful that God is still with us and will continue to support us in this time of need, as He has done throughout our life.”

My prayers are with Tony. I was inspired by his faith in this terrible time for his family, and I hope that he can indeed experience God’s support and care during this tough time.

And I hope that all of us can do the same. All of us need to remember that the days of our lives, whether they are good or bad, are in God’s hands.

When I look back on the past year, I see that I have made a mess of much of it. I had made so many resolutions. I truly wanted a New Year and a new me. But, at the end of 2005, I’m afraid that it’s the same old me looking back in the mirror.

Maybe what we need is not to make more resolutions but to approach the New Year with fresh eyes. Maybe what we need is not a new plan but a new attitude, a greater sense of openness to what God would have us do and be.

The Bible often speaks of Jesus as God’s gift to us at the right time. In Paul’s letter to the Romans we read, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6)

In his letter to Timothy, Paul encourages his young disciple by saying that the same is true of the future. At the right time, the Lord of lords and King of kings will come again.

Paul encourages Timothy to keep that assurance in mind when the going gets rough. The Apostle reminded him that it is God in Christ who holds the future, and in Him alone is there hope for life eternal.
(1 Timothy 6:12-16)

Many of us think that we control time. But, that's not true. Time controls us. No matter how many time management courses we take, we will never have enough.

But, the good news is this: God has all the time in the world. No matter where life takes us in the coming year, the seasons of our life are held in God's hands and by God's grace, all will be well.

One day all of us will go home. One day we will find ourselves in the presence of a creator God who will help us understand; He will wipe away every tear and comfort every sorrow. May God help us trust our lives and our time to His gracious and eternal providential care. Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN