

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

3:1 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.

3:9 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.

NEW YEAR NOSTALGIA

A new year has arrived. Yesterday was January 1, 2011. Many of us celebrated as we always do. We watched about 32 football games and ate mass quantities of potato chips!

Happy New Year!

Do you think the New Year really will be a happy one for you?

Some of us face the New Year with a mixture of nostalgia and trepidation. The years are adding up too fast. As the old rock song puts it, "Time keeps on slipping, slipping into the future."

On the other hand some of us are very happy to see the New Year come. 2010 has not been that good for some of us, and we are looking forward to 2011.

Maybe things will be better in the coming year.

KEEPING TIME

We keep time in many ways. Some of us keep time with a watch. We live by a schedule. We know that on particular day at a specific time we better be at a certain place.

Time is our master. Our job depends upon it.

Once we retire we don't have to be tied to the clock. We keep time by the seasons.

In the summer we visit friends up north. In the fall we make our way back to Florida. And when we break out the Christmas decorations we know that another year is about to pass.

I have a minister friend who insisted that the church install a clock at the back of the sanctuary. She said that it was her intention to be in the middle of the benediction when both hands of the clock pointed toward 12.

Now that is the voice of experience. She has been pastor of that church in Atlanta for many years and knows that if she wants to remain in that church her folks have to beat the Baptists to Olive Garden!

Time is important.

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you turned 40? I do. The church I was serving in North Carolina decided to give me an "over the hill" party complete with dead flowers!

40 seemed so old. Now it seems so young!

How we view time depends upon our vantage point.

GOD'S TIME

The Bible views time from the vantage point of eternity. Time, from a biblical perspective is a gift from God. Time is an opportunity. And time is in God's hands.

We talk about things happening in God's own time. In other words the person of faith is not anxious about the future or the past.

Instead, the person of faith is open to where God might lead today. The person of faith approaches each day with a sense of hope because each day is a gift from God.

And as our lives and circumstances change we called to accept that change because we believe this. If God is leading us every step of the way, we need not fear the change that time brings.

Time might keep on slipping into the future, but God is always with us here and now.

TIME PAST

I think we make two mistakes when it comes to time.

Some of us spend too much time in the past. We have regrets about what we should have done or said. We feel guilty about wrongs we have committed or we are angry with others who have wronged us.

I think that many people have emotional problems because they live in the past. Everyone and everything is evaluated in terms of past failures. The past can keep us from truly being open to what is going on here and now.

The biblical cure for that is profoundly simple. We say it every week.

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Guilt is a heavy burden to bear, and according to the Bible it is an unnecessary burden. I say it often, but we need to hear it often.

God is not out to get us. God is out to save us.

Believe in that. Stand on that promise. Don't lug the heavy burdens of 2010 into the New Year. Let 2011 be a New Year instead of a rehash of the old year.

Don't live in the past.

TIME FUTURE

The second mistake many of us make when it come to time is that we worry too much about the future. This has been especially true recently. The economic downturn has hurt almost every organization, business, and family.

At home and at work everyone is worried about the future. How are we going to make ends meet with less money? What is going to happen to us? How can we make sure that we survive in the future?

We should make cautious and prudent plans for the future based upon current realities. God does not call us to be irresponsible!

However, we should be careful not to let worry about the future become the overriding concern in our life.

Do you remember what Jesus said about worry?

He said that worry never adds to a person's stature. Worrying about the future does no good because we have no control over the future. The future is in God's hands, not in ours.

God will give us what we need when we need it. That's all we know, and that's all we need to know. (Matthew 6:25-34)

So, the Bible teaches us that it is unfaithful to dwell in the past or the future. We can't change the past, and we can't know the future.

THIS IS THE DAY

All we have is today. Today will have joys and today will have troubles.

But, the important question is this: "What are we going to do with this day that God has given us?" Many of us like to quote the Psalmist. We say,

"This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)

We sing it. We read it responsively. I sometimes think that we do everything but live it.

All any of us can do is to try and find some pleasure in the day that God has given us. This is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying.

Everything happens in God's time.

There is a time to be born and a time to die. There is a time to plant and a time to harvest what is planted, and so forth.

We have no control over the seasons of our life. It is futile to fill our lives with regret about what might have been. And it is equally futile to spend our lives making grand plans that may never come to fruition.

In the New Testament book of James we read that is wrong to say tomorrow I will go here and do this or that. Instead we should say,

"Lord willing, I will do this or that tomorrow."

According to James it is arrogant and boastful to make too many plans for the future. All of us are like a vapor, here today and gone tomorrow.
(James 4:13-16)

I think many of our ancestors understood this better than we do. We often act as if we have all the time in the world. But, in reality none of us are promised a tomorrow.

According to our Scripture for today, all any of us can do is embrace and enjoy this day. Enjoy the task that is before us, the work that we have to do.

Think of it not as drudgery but as God's gift.

And enjoy the simple pleasures of life, food and drink. Look for divine blessings in the commonplace.

A TIME TO LIVE, A TIME TO DIE

There is (as the writer of Ecclesiastes put it) a time to live and a time to die. Kings and paupers alike face the same fate. There is a beginning date to our life and there will be an ending date.

Christians shouldn't be afraid of dying. We believe that when we die we go to be with the Lord. As the hymn, "Come Christians Join to Sing" puts it,

"Life shall not end the strain." The song will continue in heaven.

Christians have no need to live in fear of that ending date.

But, Christians should be afraid of not living.

Christians should be afraid of not appreciating what God has given us today. Christians should be afraid of wasting the opportunities that we have today to love and give thanks for the simple pleasures of life.

One of the things that prevent us from enjoying the pleasures of this day is that we sometimes want to hold on to that which is actually finished and done.

Some refuse to let go of a relationship that has ceased to be healthful. Some refuse to let go of old friends and embrace new ones when they move to a new city.

Some even refuse to let go of an old church in order to worship God in a new place or circumstance.

A TIME TO BUILD, A TIME TO BREAK DOWN

A friend told of how a new church was made possible in his Presbytery because an old church was brave enough to embrace the fact that the time has come for it to go. He said that dying church gathered one Sunday and gave thanks to God for the saints that had gone before them and for the years of faithful service they had been able to offer.

And then the members of that church walked out the door, sold the church, gave the money to Presbytery and said,

“Please use this to start a new church.”

And it happened.

A new, vibrant church was formed from the resources of a church that was brave enough to know that its time had come and gone.

There is a time to build up and a time to break down. There is a time to be born and a time to die.

But, all of these events occur in the context of God’s providential care. Everything occurs in God’s time.

THE POEM

A minister told of receiving a copy of Sanskrit poem written over 2,000 years ago. It was a Christmas present given by friends in a church she served.

The next year the lives of this family and the lives of a dozen other family members were snuffed out in a tragic plane crash.

In memory of this family the minister begins each day by reading a copy of this poem that hangs on her office wall. It goes,

“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 of truth and 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 announced, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near." (Mark 1:15)

That's still true. The kingdom of God is always present tense. The kingdom of God comes near each and every day.

The question is this, "Will we have eyes to see and ears to hear?"

WHERE IS GOD?

"Where shall I find God in life?" the disciples asked the elder."

"God is with you everywhere," the holy one replied.

"But if that is true," the disciple asked, "Why can I not see this presence?"

"Because," said the elder, "you are like the fish who, when in the ocean, never notice the water."

In the book of Acts we read, "In God we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

The preacher of Ecclesiastes teaches us that same lesson. All time is in God's hands. Divinity is like the sea in which we swim.

And God not only created this world and made everything beautiful in its time. God also put a sense of eternity in our hearts. (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

God give us a sense that there is more to this life than just this life. We are given a sense that life is precious and holy.

There is a sense that we were meant for something more, but that something more often escapes us. It is a holy mystery that we cannot always unravel on our own.

ETERNAL PURPOSE

But, our lack of understanding should not stop us from striving. On the contrary, we 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 greater ways than we can every imagine.

This continues to be a great source of encouragement for me in the work that I do.

Several years ago I received an unexpected email from a lady in North Florida. She was trying to contact a lawyer in Kissimmee but was unexpectedly directed to our church's website and to a sermon that I had preached.

The sermon was about how all that we have belongs to God. She said that this was exactly what 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 even uses computer error to further His kingdom! And God can and will use us as we toil away in our little corner of the world.

There is eternal purpose to our daily lives.

So, my friends in the coming year let us rejoice in the work that we have to do. Let us give thanks for the food that we have to eat. Each day let us try to do one good thing to others out of gratitude and praise for God's grace.

And let us remember that our life and times are in God's hands. Let us trust God to keep us in the coming year. Remember all time is God's time.

Amen.