

Sunday January 17th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 3
“Anybody Got the Time.”

Mr. Jones badly needed to know the time, but his wrist watch, alas, he had forgotten to wind it up, and it had stopped hours before. The streets were deserted, and the only living soul in sight was a man sunning himself on a deck chair on the large, fenced-off lawn of the local mental health facility. A little dubious, but observing that the man really looked quite harmless, and reflecting that in any case he had no choice, Mr. Jones called out, “Sir, do you by any chance have the time?”

“The time? One moment.” Suddenly the man in the chair was galvanized to action. He leapt out of his chair, withdrew a small stick from his pocket, and a small hammer from another. He tapped the stick into the ground, adjusted it carefully until he was satisfied it was vertical, then whipped out a measuring tape. He measured the length of the stick above the ground and the length of the shadow.

Throwing himself prone to the ground, he sighted the top of the stick against some point on the building, made a mark on the ground, and then made a few new measurements. Out of his back pocket came a calculator. Back and forth he manipulated it and finally, perspiring slightly, he said, “It is exactly 3:22 pm., provided this is June 30th, which I believe it is. Mr. Jones, who watched all of this in astonishment, could not help but be convinced and set his watch accordingly.

Then Mr. Jones said, “That was the most impressive use of the solar position to tell time, but what do you do at night, or on a cloudy day, when there are no shadows to measure?” “Oh, that’s easy” said the inmate, holding up his left arm, “Then I just look at my wristwatch.” (A Treasury of Humour p.408) It is incredible, when you consider it, how important time and the reckoning of time really is.

Knowing the correct time and the passing of time, is at the heart of so much of what we do. Every day, actually, several times a day, we need to know the correct time, or the correct moment for something. Some examples include, knowing the correct time to wake up and get to work or school on time. Timing is critical in cooking. Cook too short a time and something is undercooked; too long and it is charcoal.

We need to know the time to take our medications. People expend tremendous amounts of energy and focus to know the correct moments to buy or sell stocks. In telling a joke, timing is everything. In asking for a raise, or telling someone bad news, you try and find the right moment. Einstein said “time is relative”, so sometimes it feels like it flies by, and sometimes it feels like it drags. We talk of the “right time” and the “wrong time”.

So, maybe that is why our passage today from Ecclesiastes resonates so strongly with us. The preacher writes that all of life is marked by time. Instinctively we know this. We even try to manage this with: cell phones, calendars, watches and clocks. Because we are affected by the fickleness of time, there are some critical lessons the Preacher in Ecclesiastes wants us to learn. Lessons somewhat hard to take, but nevertheless vital.

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The first lesson is as obvious as the nose on our faces, but perhaps we do not comprehend fully its significance. The lesson being that with the passing of time, there is the inevitability of change. The Preacher's thesis is in verse one. "There is a time for everything." In the first eight verses of this passage, the Preacher uses the word "time" on thirty occasions. He makes no judgments about these items subject to time, but rather is simply stating what he has observed.

Notice also the implications expressed here is that all these events are appointed (as some versions record it). The events in our lives do not happen by chance. God has a purpose behind each and every event. The word translated here to convey "appointed" is an interesting choice because it also conveys the idea of "delight". The Preacher wants us to understand that there is peace, and even delight, in fitting into God's plans, and his cycle of events.

The preacher then launches into a series of 28 statements. 14 positive ones and 14 negative ones. The twenty-eight statements form contrasting pairs like; birth and death. God has appointed a time for us to be born and a time for us to die. God knew I would be born on June 6th, 1962 and he knows when I will breathe my last. He knows when both events will occur, and he always has known. There are absolutely no surprises with God.

But time is fleeting. I have always thought that the passing of time is best displayed by an hourglass, with the sand pouring down the hole, but unfortunately, we cannot turn the hourglass over and start again. When the sand runs out, it runs out. This makes life certainly appear like a revolving door; with people coming and going. But the same holds for the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom; in fact, all of nature.

We know that seeds are planted in the spring, and the plants grow all summer and then they are eventually harvested. That's the cycle, and then the next year it happens all over again. The Preacher continues with the fact that even the activities of creation and destruction have their appropriate times. "A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to build and a time to tear down."

The word kill here is not the one in Hebrew used for murder. The word here refers to the act of killing in warfare, or as capital punishment. To the preacher, there are justifiable reasons to kill, especially in causes of justice and defense of the vulnerable. There is also a time to build, or create things, or relationships etc. and a time to destroy them or tear them apart. There is also a time to weep and a time to laugh, and a time to mourn and a time to dance. In other words, the ups and downs of life are natural and ordained by God.

Grief is a natural part of losing someone. It is a healthy process, and God wants us to grieve at the appropriate moments. It's also important to laugh and celebrate the good things of life. I am so grateful to God that he gave me a strong sense of humour and a love of jokes and funny stories. Many times, in ministering among you, this gift has been my greatest tool to ease tension and help families through the dark moments of life.

In fact, having a sense of humour and being able to laugh at yourself may be one of the most important qualities for success in life and ministry. All of this raises some powerful questions in the minds and hearts of all of us. Is it possible, do you think, to worship God in the midst of all these differing seasons?

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Can we find joy when we are ill, laughter in our sorrow? Is it possible to “give thanks in all things” as the Apostle Paul commends us? The reality is that if you can only thank God in seasons of great health and prosperity, you will not be thanking God very much. That is why the “prosperity Gospel” some famous television preachers espouse, is garbage. Jesus said “the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike”. Good things and bad things happen to everyone

In 3:5 we have an unusual couplet of statements. “A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones”. Why is the preacher concerned about masonry? Actually, the words “throw stones” is a Hebrew euphemism meaning sexual intercourse. The preacher means there is a time to have sex and a time to refrain. The same thought refers to the idea of a time to embrace and a time to turn away. In the Old Testament, people refrained from sexual activity during times of mourning.

The preacher moves on to talk about a “time to search and a time to lose, and a time to keep and a time to throw away.” If you are a fan of garage sales and flea markets, this is your verse. The point is that possessions are fleeting. Everything: wears out, or becomes unusable, or out of date and it must be discarded. So, we throw it out, trade it in, donate it to Value Village, or hand it down. If we didn’t, we would be buried in stuff.

Perhaps you have seen on television or heard stories about people who cannot throw anything away. We call them hoarders or maybe pack-rats. We now know that such behaviour is a serious psychological illness related to obsessive compulsive disorder. What often happens to all these suffering individuals is that eventually the stuff they accumulate steals their joy of living. Sometimes the stuff actually ends up killing them as they get buried alive. Like the famous song of the Disney movie Frozen, sometimes you have to “Let it Go”.

“There is a time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak up.” In the Old Testament, whenever someone was in mourning, they would often tear their clothes, and remain silent. When the time of mourning was over, they would get back to their daily routines. A wonderful depiction of this is in 1 Samuel 12, where because of his sin, David’s child with Bathsheba dies. After a period of mourning, David gets up and returns to his regular life.

Also critical is learning when it is the appropriate time to speak. As someone whose mouth is well acquainted with the contours of my foot, I think it is safe to say we all have spoken when we shouldn’t. The opposite is true as well; for there are times when we should have spoken up and didn’t, leading to hurt and problems for others. I strongly believe that the Holy Spirit prompts us to speak up, and sometimes prompts us to bite our tongues.

The last set in the poem are the hardest to reconcile for us. “A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.” As followers of Jesus, we have come to understand hatred is not an appropriate response to anyone, even our enemies. Every moment of every day, we believe Christians should be about love. But Jesus did hate something. He hated sin. He hates the way sin enslaves people and ruined lives.

We too hate the work of sin in our own lives, and in the lives of those we love. We cringe when we see people, we love, making choices we know will only lead to heart ache. The preacher ends his poem with a positive word; “peace”.

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This last line of scripture was actually made famous by a song penned by Bob Seeger but recorded by the Byrds in 1965 called “Turn, Turn, Turn”. It begins, “To everything, turn, turn, turn”.

This song became an anti-war anthem during the Vietnam conflict. In the song, Seeger quotes from our passage today “a time for war and a time for peace” then he adds, “I swear it’s not too late.” Suddenly this passage of Ecclesiastes enters the consciousness of the counter culture movement. Unfortunately, Seeger and the Byrds got it wrong. There will never truly be peace until everything and everyone bows the knee to the Prince of Peace.

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes understood that sometimes tyranny can run roughshod over humanity, and war becomes an unfortunate outcome. No one likes war, except arms dealers perhaps, but timing is everything, and sometimes swords are necessary until the return of Jesus. It is a mistake to believe that if we just ignored tyranny it will go away and leave us alone.

The Preacher shifts gears a bit in verse nine. “What do people get for all their hard work?” Good question! Why should I go to work? Why should I get married and just end up divorcing? Why have children who grow up and disappoint you? The value in these things does not come from our hands but by the providence and grace of God. As verse 11 states, God made everything, even events that occur through human action.

Our problem is that we allow fuzzy thinking to invade our minds and hearts. We ask the wrong questions. “Why was I born this way? Why did my father treat me this way? Why did my friend move away or die? Why is life such a struggle? You see, our attention is on the wrong thing. When we look at our lives, we see a fuzzy, ugly, restrictive cocoon; God however plans and sets in motion the butterfly.

We see only today but God sees eternity. We look at the external, but he sees the internal. God makes everything beautiful in its own time; including our losses, our brokenness, our failures, our failed relationships, our illness, even our terminal illness... whatever we are going through. Without God, life is purposeless, profitless, miserable and meaningless. With him, everything will eventually make sense.

God has placed eternity in our hearts, to get us to ask these deep questions so we can be drawn to him. Saint Augustine said, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.” Blaise Pascal said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that cannot be filled by any created being, but by God alone made known through Jesus Christ.” The truth is we all have an eternal itch.

The preacher tells us that one of the best ways to respond to our reality is to make the most of it. To enjoy life, but not in a hedonistic or selfish way. Instead, we experience joy in life when we include God in everything we do. He wrote, “I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do good in one’s lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor-it is a gift of God.”

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So, enjoy life but do not waste your time. We all know life is stressful. We have pressures from people, projects, and so much more. At any moment my well laid out plans could change. My mother has of late taken to stressing to any who will listen that you need to celebrate the good events of life because you never know when sorrow will knock on your door. So, enjoy an ice cream. Watch a movie. Take your spouse or friend out for a nice dinner.

Create good memories, with God in the very heart of it all. God has the final word, the grand plan that we are all a part of. Everything God does is awe inspiring. Everything occurs in its own ordained time. There is great peace in knowing we, and everything we are a part of, is in the hands of a loving God. So, anybody got the time?