

A Time and a Season

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All of our lives are marked by seasons. There are of course the regular seasons that come and go year by year. The end of Summer, turning back toward school, and regular routines...

Thanksgiving and Christmas, connecting with family, celebrating with friends.

Spring, and its familiar sense of rebirth and rejuvenation.

But our lives have longer seasons too. Longer spans of our time marked by what they shared.

The season with the kids at home.

The season after a loss.

Or a season of time in one place, giving way to a season in another.

As you know, I find myself now at the turning of such a larger season, as I look ahead now to the final months of my ministry here in Milton and prepare to move with my family to Maine.

There is a time, and a season, for everything under heaven.

The wisdom contained in this familiar passage from Ecclesiastes can be a bit jarring, and even a bit distressing.

Of course who among us could argue with a time of building, a time of healing, a time of embracing, a time of love, a time of peace...

But with each is paired a less welcome companion, a time for war, a time for hate, a time to tear, a time to weep, a time to tear down, a time to kill...

I think part of the reason that these words are so unnerving to us is because we are accustomed to hearing the Bible in a more aspirational tone. Describing the world as it could be, or as it ought to be.

But this teacher of wisdom, is just telling us how the world is.

Perhaps there ought not be times of hate, and war... but there are.

We may pray to avoid times of mourning and weeping... but they come.

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Earlier this year, I led the bible study that was meeting on zoom through the book of Ecclesiastes, and all of us were surprised together to find just how flippant this short text can be about the human condition, and yet it is hard to deny the honesty of the authors assessment.

He will go on, after today's reading, to remind us (as if we needed reminding) that good behavior us no protection against life's perils, that bad things happen to good people, and perhaps more frustratingly, good things happen to bad people.

What will be, will be, he says. Why worry? Enjoy life.

Hebrew Bible scholar Ellen Davis has written a wonderful book about the wisdom literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

She writes that, while at first blush it may seem that Ecclesiastes is simply saying “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” In fact, the wisdom here is pulling us deeper.

Davis writes that the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is inviting us to take up a receiving posture, rather than a seizing posture. To stop striving. To stop pretending that we can control everything. And to simply wait, with open arms, to receive the day that will come to us from God.

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Here Ecclesiastes starts to almost sound like it is pointing us toward a sort of Buddhist detachment, letting go of our sense that we can be the masters of our own fate, and instead learning to live in the time, and the season in which we find ourselves.

There is an expression common to great athletes, perhaps you have heard it. “Let the game come to you.” It seems almost counterintuitive, for a competitor to be unaggressive, yet things start to go badly when you force it, get jumpy, start over-correcting your last mistake, or chasing down an opportunity that is long gone. “Let the game come to you.”

I think that part of what Ecclesiastes is telling us, is “let your life come to you.”

Which is to say that rather than chase after in each moment what you wish life would be, how can you stand in what life is and respond faithfully to it.

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For you and I, this is a season of goodbye. The next few weeks will be our chance to spend time in this time of saying farewell.

When we come to my last Sunday here, we will exchange words of gratitude, honesty, and forgiveness with one another, words that pastors and congregations have spoken to each other time and time again, throughout the church, and across generations.

I will thank you for the privilege it has been to serve as your pastor.

I will ask for your forgiveness for the mistakes I have made.

I will offer my encouragement and hope for you in all that lies ahead.

And our denominational leadership will ask you to do the same, they will invite you to express gratitude, ask for and offer forgiveness, and offer encouragement for what lies ahead.

This is our work in this season. Gratitude. Reconciliation. Encouragement.

Goodbyes are hard. They can be uncomfortable. But this is the time for goodbye, and we are being invited to stand in what life is for us in this moment, and respond faithfully to it.

When I was in High School, I travelled with a youth choir to meet with another youth choir in Chile. For several weeks we sang together, we travelled together, we spent nearly every waking moment together, we became fast, deep, beloved, friends.

On the last night we were together before we headed to the airport, we were all sitting around imagining a future, years away, where we would all be adults who could do what we wanted, and we would all get back together, the twenty or so of us, surely this was too special to just end, we talked about meeting up in 10 years, we talked about what we might do, how our lives might change.

One of the pastors who was leading our group overheard the conversation, and she brought herself right into the middle of it.

“In all likelihood” she said. “You will never see each other again.”

I remember in the moment feeling so angry that she would quash our imagining...

But she was right.

And her direct remark served us so well, as it turned the energy of our evening toward what we really needed to be doing. We needed to be saying a real, hard, goodbye. Years later. I am so grateful to her. Because she reminded us what time it was. What season it was. So that we could live appropriately in it.

It was time to say goodbye.

Now this is our season for saying goodbye. And the best way I know to live in this season of goodbye is to express gratitude, seek reconciliation, and offer encouragement. That is what I will be seeking to do with you. And I hope you will do it with me.

And I am really glad that this season of goodbye began with a baptism. Because, as I say each time we baptize someone in this church: Every time we gather at this font. We have a chance to see and remember what it is that binds this community together. That across generations the church is carried forward by what God does here...

Baptism reminds each of us that God’s sustaining grace is a feature of every season of life. That God’s love will meet us no matter where we stand. No matter what else is going on around us. And that God sustains each of us throughout life’s journey.

So I would just add that one, very important addition to the wisdom.

There is a time, and a season, for everything under heaven.

And God is with us in them all.