

“For Everything There is a Season”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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The Book of Ecclesiastes is usually called “skeptical” Wisdom or “dissenting” Wisdom. We don’t really know who the author of Ecclesiastes is – some scholars believe it’s King Solomon, writing in his old age. The author of this text is often referred to as “Teacher,” which fits well, as the voice is one of a sage who has lived long and reveals a touch of weariness throughout the narrative. But the voice is not cynical. The Teacher recognizes a certain reliable order that God has put in creation, a time and a season for everything. He urges us to recognize our own mortality in the face of God’s eternity.

When we’ve lived for a while, we gain perspective. We have the vantage point of seeing our experiences through the lens of a deeper self-understanding and recognize how we’ve grown, and alongside what we’ve gained, note the lingering pain or disappointment we might be feeling. If you spend any time with the Wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, you will hear the knowledge that life is fleeting and ephemeral, leading us to humility and to delight in the gifts of God. Our human nature, however, doesn’t necessarily lend itself to humility or delight.

After worship this morning our Adult Ed class will be diving into Parker Palmer’s book, “On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old.” Palmer’s words came to me as I contemplated the voice from today’s Bible Wisdom teaching. In the preface of his book, he explains what he means by “the brink of everything.” He writes, “Every day, I get closer to the brink of everything. We’re all headed that way, of course, even when we’re young, though most of us are too busy with Important Matters to ponder our mortality. But when a serious illness or accident strikes, or someone dear to us dies – or we go to a class reunion and wonder who all those old people are - it becomes harder to ignore the drop-off that lies just over the edge of our lives.” He expands on this further as he notes that being “on the brink of everything” gives him new perspectives on his past, present, and future, and new insights into the inner dynamics that shape and drive his life.

I have noticed that I'm better able to appreciate what I now carry with me in the wake of all that I've experienced in my life so far. However, I continue to struggle as I try to imagine what the future holds. I detect in myself both peace and apprehension when I hear there is a time for everything. I welcome the times to plant and to embrace and to seek, but I struggle to welcome with open arms times of change and transition: to pluck up, to break down, to throw away - such seasons are scary and unnerving.

Tippe has been experiencing transition and change on multiple levels over a long stretch of time. About four years ago, your beloved pastor announced her intent to retire. There was no way to predict the pandemic and all the upheaval to come. Pastor Karen and Session faithfully moved forward in a process while bringing this faith community alongside to continue to live into your purpose and passion. In just a couple of weeks, after almost a full year in which Pastor Karen and I have served Tippe together, Karen's ministry here will come to completion.

Alongside the pastoral transition, much of our world and our understandings about our world have changed – we've faced a pandemic, voted in a new President, witnessed the galvanizing change of a racial reckoning, gained a fuller understanding of climate change, and a deeper appreciation for our health and wellbeing, seeking policies and practices that support families. We've experienced or observed in others increased anxiety and mental health challenges. We're learning how to be more inclusive and how to show up with compassion; attentive to where we might more readily tap into grace for ourselves and those around us.

Even in the midst of so much change, this community has worked tirelessly to continue to serve those experiencing food insecurity and a lack of shelter. The collaborative relationships with other churches and faith communities, our Presbytery, and local social service agencies remain strong. Throughout the changing seasons, some things remain unchanged. There are children of God in need of help and there are children of God available to help in every season.

It is no surprise that today's text is often lifted up during funerals or memorials, and also preached in churches on the first Sunday of the new year. This wisdom literature speaks to a time for new beginnings as well as

a time to say goodbye. How do we make space in our hearts and in our understanding, to embrace these differences, these ups and downs?

As today's Bible Wisdom teaching opens, we're told there is a time or season for everything, but these times or seasons are largely unknowable. We can't know what is to come, or for how long it will last, but we can be intentional about our response in the seasons of plenty and the seasons of drought that inevitably cycle through our lives.

As I reflected on the various verses of this text and the opposites that were brought into conversation together, I thought about various roles and careers that navigate expected ups and downs. Every good investor knows that there is a time to buy and a time to sell. Every good quarterback knows that there is a time to go for the touchdown and a time just to run out the clock. Every good poker player knows that there is a time to hold and a time to fold.

I also began to think about the people in my life who have shown me how to move through some of these seasons.

My grandfather, whose experience with the Great Depression made a huge impression on him, saved old nails and screws in an old tin can. He built a rack above his car in the garage to hold pieces of lumber left over from various projects. He was careful to clean his tools so they wouldn't rust—and to store them in their proper place when they weren't in use. He never made a lot of money, but he always made enough to add something to his savings every month. In other words, he was careful "to seek" and "to keep."

But Grandpa wasn't a miser. He bought new cars instead of used. He could always find money to buy his grandchildren an ice cream cone or a candy bar. When there was something special going on in Detroit, he would take us to events and show us around his old neighborhood. He was a wise man who knew when to save and when to spend—when to hunker down and when to enjoy—when "to seek" and when "to lose"—when "to keep" and when "to cast away." His wisdom in this respect enriched my life and that of my family.

When you think about your own life and the lives of those around you, what are the seasons that have impacted you deeply and shaped how you move in the world? What stories might you tell?

Central to today's text is the message that every little thing matters. It all comes together to form a life, to challenge us to focus on our response, our actions, our behaviors. And as I've contemplated these verses this week, I've gained the insight that Parker Palmer touches on – we get distracted by what we believe are the Important Matters of life, which often comes down to making a living rather than *making a life*. When loss and heartbreak, grief and bad news stop us short, we sometimes wake up to the gift of life - its beauty and fragility, the opportunity to experience joy and share love. May we remain open and alert to the cycles and seasons of our lives. May we gain compassion for ourselves and grace others with the same compassion. May we remember that our time here on earth is brief and revel in all of our seasons. Amen.