

Telling the Time
March 8, 2009

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.

A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. The Lord has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God 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. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before the Lord.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

Ecclesiastes 3 is about the different seasons of our life. There is a time for introductions and hellos, but today, at least for me, is a day for goodbyes and for gratitude. I am thankful for the ministry that I have shared with the wonderful members of this congregation and the dedicated church staff. I have seen the body of Christ in action as each and every member of our church brings our own personalities, talents, and interests to our common ministry. I have appreciated those times when you have shared your lives with me: whether it has been sitting with our youth sharing funny stories or discussing serious choices they face, seeing you as a congregation rise to the challenge and address the needs of our community through the Butterfly or Angel Trees, Grace Network, the Red Cross, or Christmas Share, or being present with you as we have celebrated new births or grieved together at services of Witness to the Resurrection.

I am grateful for the ways that you have supported me and helped me grow. Since I arrived in Martinsville in 2003, you have helped me find my voice as a pastor. I appreciate your patience and assistance as I have grown as a preacher, teacher, and administrator in this call.

Scholars identify the author of Ecclesiastes as Qoheleth, which comes from the Hebrew word that can be translated as preacher, teacher, or assembler, as in one who assembles and presides over a meeting. Qoheleth is the most fervent empiricist in the entire Bible. In other words, Qoheleth is a straight shooter. He calls it like he sees it. He does not try to put on rose-colored glasses; he honors life in all its ups and downs,

complexities and simplicities. Qoheleth is not an idealist: he believes that it is more fruitful for us to have our eyes open, see things as they really are, and to make the best of the situation before us.

We can apply Qoheleth's wisdom to our situation in the church today. Many people look longingly back to the 1950s when the church was the center of many communities and when all the church needed to do to reach out to visitors was to open our doors. Qoheleth encourages us to be honest about the changing dynamics in our community and world, but also to remain confident that God is working, here and now. Rather than feeling like things do not measure up to how they were a generation ago, we instead can ask what possibilities exist in the present and celebrate our current achievements. Qoheleth invites us to listen carefully to the signs of the times.

You may remember that once I told you the story that took place when people used icehouses to preserve their food because refrigerators had not been invented yet. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an icehouse. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust but didn't find it. His fellow workers looked, but their efforts also proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the icehouse during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it.

"I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking."¹ Often the question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are being still enough, quiet enough, and attentive enough to hear.

We studied Ecclesiastes in the Doctor of Ministry course I took this January. Our class broke into small groups and one of the small groups was assigned to come up with a bumper sticker that sums up Ecclesiastes 3. The bumper sticker slogan they came up with was, "What time is it?" As we go through life, that is a key question to keep asking ourselves. We can get into trouble if we work tirelessly under the assumption that it is a time for us to plant, when God intends for it to be a time for us to pluck up what is planted. We can get ourselves into trouble if we speak up too hastily, when it is really a time when we are supposed to keep silent. If we are able to identify what time it is, we can find peace and tranquility by matching the natural rhythms of life.

There are times in life when we have choices: where we reach a fork in the road and can decide where we go next. There are times when we can pick between two or more alternatives, but that is not the kind of situation Qoheleth is speaking about in Ecclesiastes 3. Qoheleth is addressing those situations where life is thrust upon us and takes us places, whether we would wish it or not. Qoheleth knows that we cannot control where we are born, when we die, or when joy or misfortune comes our way.

It is so appropriate that the children have acted out the play "The Tale of the Three Trees" on the same Sunday we are exploring God's Word in Ecclesiastes 3.² The play begins when the trees are sprouting. The young trees cannot wait until they are older and used for a special purpose, but there are joys they experience as they grow up.

¹ Story Comes from *1001 Quotes, Illustrations, & Humorous Stories*, p. 279.

² The play we used is entitled "The Tale of the Three Trees." The music was written by Allen Pote and the lyrics and narration were written by Tom S. Long.

When we are older with greater responsibilities, we cannot recapture some of the same joys we cherished when we were growing up. So when we, like the young trees, are in a stage of life when we are growing up, know that there is nothing wrong with us and we are exactly where God wants us to be in that moment.

The three trees have dreams for their lives. The first tree hopes to be a great treasure chest; then he is disappointed when he becomes a mere feeding trough for animals. The second tree dreams of being a large sailing vessel, fit for a king, but instead becomes a rugged fishing boat. The third tree hopes to grow tall and point to the heavens, but instead is cut down and becomes scrap.

But the Lord knew what God was doing with those three trees. The first tree that became a feeding trough did not hold jewels and gold, but instead held the world's greatest treasure, when a young mother wrapped her son in bands of cloth and laid him in that manger. The second tree may not have been used by a simple band of fishermen, but as the King of Kings stilled the storm, the second tree understood that it had served God's Son. When the third tree became a cross on Calvary, through Christ's resurrection, it became the greatest symbol of the Christian faith.

The trees in the play have a benefit that we humans do not have: the trees cannot fight it when God has other plans for their lives. On the other hand, we often resist doing what God intends, either because we are uncertain of God's will or because we stubbornly want to hold onto our own sense of control.

In her commentary of Ecclesiastes, Ellen Davis writes, "We need to decide whether we will fight to the death the ever-changing rhythms of life, or whether we will dance with them."³ Since Qoheleth recognizes that the joys of today may be gone tomorrow and the sorrows of today may be replaced by fresh good news, finding enjoyment and meaning in life is not a matter of good luck, since all will face hardship. Faithfulness involves continually striving to discern God's will in our lives so that we are ready to receive God's new gifts and are ready to move forward, rather than getting stuck in the mud, when the things we have appreciated are lost.

I have found that God usually gives me enough information for today and that I can live off of that. Of course, I would like to know more; I would prefer to be able to plan further ahead, but God gives us enough for today. It may be a good thing that we do not get to know it all: would we, like Jonah, run away from the purpose God has for us if we knew all that was in store for us?

A man is standing on the side of the road about a half-mile outside of a village. A traveler comes down the road and asks the man, "Can you tell me about the people of this village? I am thinking of moving here." The man asked the traveler, "Can I ask you what the people were like where you lived before?" "Oh, they were scoundrels, cheaters, and nasty. I am glad to be leaving them behind," the traveler explained. The man replied, "Unfortunately, I expect that you will encounter a similar lot in this town." The traveler was disappointed, but continued down the road.

³ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 184.

Then about an hour later, a second traveler came up to the man. She asked him the same question the first traveler did, "I am new to this village. What can you tell me about its inhabitants?" The man also asked her, "Tell me about where you came from." She replied, "Oh, I left behind lots of friends and will miss that warm and friendly place." The man told her, "The good news is that I expect that you will find the same kind of good friends here." That wise man on the side of the road knew that our outlook on life can help us appreciate the new blessings God brings our way.

I recently heard the quotation, "Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, but to learn how to dance in the rain." How true! In Ecclesiastes, we learn that life is full of ups and downs. There will be a time to laugh and a time to mourn, a time to seek and a time to lose, and a time to die and a time to be born. The good news is that both the ups and downs have their value. Even when we are going through difficulties, we may be in the very place where God intends for us to be, if we are ready to listen for God's will. So the question we have to ask ourselves is: What time is it? And how can we fit into the work God is already doing in this moment? God is the author of all time, redeeming the positive and the negative, giving us direction in the moment, and hope for a future where we can all experience God's peace and wholeness. Thanks be to God! Amen.