

New Year's Day –
God Time
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Well, today is the first day of 2012. How does that make you feel? Some, I am sure, come to this day with a sense of joy. The year 2011 was a tough time for them and they are glad to be able to put it behind them. Others approach this year with dread. They know there are major issues looming that they are going to have to finally deal with them. There is no putting it off any longer.

Many of us approach a new year with ambivalence. We feel a bit like Ebenezer Scrooge who in first talking to his nephew says, "What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?"

One way at looking at this passage from Ecclesiastes would support this kind of view. For everything there is a season. On goes life in one long repetitive circle. What gain has the worker from his toil? When you begin to embrace this idea, and it is my belief that this is how much of the world does view life, you get into problems. Life is filled with pessimism. Life comes to us filled with good and bad and we just slog along. We struggle to cope with the issues of today and not worry too much about tomorrow. After all we can't make much difference. Grab what you can for yourself. They ascribe to what they believe to be a biblical passage, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." This isn't found in scripture and as we shall see in a minute, how the part of this passage shared in Ecclesiastes really has a different thrust than this self-centered view of life. Too many live a life devoid of much hope or optimism focused mostly inward on wants and needs seeing it as one long repetitive cycle leading to the grave. And as I said, and you are free to disagree with me, in my opinion. this is the common view of life for much of society.

Is there another way to look at this passage? A hope filled, vision filled, view of life? I believe there is. It all depends upon how you read this poem. Instead of seeing the list as a statement that life is an unending cycle of joy and sorrow, planting and harvesting, and war and peace with no end you can approach it with the understanding

that the fixed order provides structure for life and for creation. This kind of order is what allows human moral decision making possible. Much of our scientific theory is based on the principle of cause and effect, or another way of saying it, the dependability of creation.

I want you to think about this for a moment. Just try and image what life would be like without order. Could summer follow winter one year and follow fall another? Or you plant a carrot seed and get a squash. Two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom combine and you get, not water but hydrochloride. You get the idea. Life would not be tenable if there were not order in creation. In fact we cannot even imagine a life without order.

What is true in the created order is also true, for the most part, in our lives. If you center your life in faith, act kindly and are willing to help others your life will tend one direction. If you are mean, selfish and hurtful a different scenario would unfold. If you cheat on tests in school you might get an A but you would not learn the material. If you cheat on your spouse you are not going to have a loving trusting relationship. You get the idea. There is order to our relationships as well. Most of our laws are based on this concept.

View this way, one can then hear in this poem a challenge to be wise and to be ethical. We can begin to understand that there is God's timing instead of our desires and to try and discern when one's actions are in keeping with God's time and then to act decisively.

So with that in mind I want us to look at the concluding verses a little more closely. He ends by saying, "God has made everything suitable for its time." This is what the list is all about, realizing that we live in God's time instead of our own. Think about how much better it would be if we paused to ask, "What does God want to have happen at this time and in this situation?" before we said or did thing. It would mean that at times we would keep silent and listen instead of filling the silence with our words. It would also mean that when we get those urges to speak up and to take a stand we would listen to them. It would challenge us to see when we are to hold memories, people or things dear and when we need to release them. Living into God's time and direction is hard but it is what can and does give life meaning.

I am reminded of a person who needed to move out of their home because of health issues. She talked to me about it and said, "I thought about it and realize that there is no other option in my situation. The choice I have is whether or not to make this a positive experience for those helping me." With that understanding she bravely and as cheerfully as she could muster, oversaw the selling of her house and the parting of her things. She held her head high and thanked all who were helping her move into assisted living. I would later hear her children mention what an easy time they had helping mom. This is living in God's time. She understood that there is a time for everything under heaven and chose to live into that experience instead of rejecting it.

Further on the writer says; "God has put a sense of past and future into our minds." I see this as saying God has invited us to walk with God on the journey of life. We are to recall the events of the past, learning from them, rejoicing in some happy thoughts and using them to keep us grounded. We are also, each day to be living for tomorrow and all that it will bring. We can predict part of the future because life is orderly and so we need to live into it now. The older we get the harder it is to live with a future gaze. Change is always hard and it becomes more difficult with time. We would like things to not change, to be like they were when, and you can name your own golden time. But life is progressive. The future will not wait just because we are uncomfortable with it and its demands. God has given us this awareness of the passage of time so we can live into our future. Think about what that means for today.

We are at the beginning a new year. I am not into New Year's resolutions. They are usually unrealistic and a source of embarrassment 365 days from now when we realize we haven't accomplished them. But we can look ahead and realize there are ways to embrace the future. What piece of technology have you been meaning or wanting to learn but have been putting it off? What letter or call have you needed to make but haven't? What class have you been thinking of taking but haven't? You get the idea.

But I love this one, remember God is in control. The minute we begin to talk about order and predictability people begin to think that they can figure out what God is doing and going to do. God is at work in the world, God is going to act and we have to trust and realize we cannot figure it all out. You only have to read the papers around this

time of year to hear religious types predicting exactly what God is going to do in this year. Jesus would also remind us that we will not know the exact time of when God is going to act. Living in God's time is still a life of trust not of control.

Finally I want to end talking about this passage that is so often misquoted: "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil." I hope you really hear this. It isn't a fatalistic or self-centered view but instead a belief that God wants us to enjoy life and enjoy what we are doing in life. I believe he is saying this at the end of the poem to remind us that we will only find joy as we begin to live fully and completely into God's time. When we are not trying to figure it all out, trying to make life fit into our wants and needs but instead celebrating how God is moving purposefully in the world and in our lives we can find joy in all we do.

May this year be one where whatever happens, positive or not so positive, you live it in God's presence with trust and with joy.