

December 31 – The Right Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

“For everything there is a time,” proclaims the writer of Ecclesiastes. We focus more on the passage of time today than on any other day of the year. Tomorrow is the first day of 2018. We have been seeing year-in-review clips on the news for days. We listen to pundits prognosticating about the future. The idea that time marches on is clearly being proclaimed!

How is this awareness of the passage of time affecting you this morning? What are you feeling? Some will leave 2017 behind with regret. Wonderful things happened this year and you will be sad to resign them to the past. Others of you, I am sure, can hardly wait to shake the dust of 2017 off your shoes and move on. This year was a tough time and you are glad to be able to put it behind you. You are more than ready to focus on the new year certain that 2018 will be better. Some of you have been waiting for tomorrow with joy and excitement. Something wonderful that you have been planning will occur in the coming year. A few of you wish that tomorrow would never come. You are approaching the new year with dread. There are major issues that are looming and you are going to have to finally deal with them. There is no putting it off any longer. The majority of us, I would guess, approach this new year with ambivalence. We don't have any strong emotions concerning the coming of 2018. New Year's Day is a reminder that time marches on. Like me, what you might be feeling is that time seems to be marching faster and faster with each passing year!

The passage from Ecclesiastes that I read talks about time. There is a time for everything under heaven. What does a statement like that mean to you? For some it solidifies their pessimistic view of life. Here is how they would summarize their worldview. Life comes to us filled with good and bad and we just trudge along struggling to cope. Grab what you can for yourself from life. They buy into a worldview that they believe to be from this biblical passage, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” This isn't found in scripture but it does describe how many approach living. What the writer says is: “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 that can be

summarized, “he who dies with the most toys wins” but instead a belief that God wants us to enjoy life and enjoy what we are doing in life. The only way we will find this kind of joy is when we begin to live fully and completely into God’s time, which is what that list we read is all about.

Instead of seeing the list as a pessimistic statement that life is an unending cycle of joy and sorrow, planting and harvesting, and war and peace with no end we, as people of faith, should be able to see that the writer of Ecclesiastes was presenting us with a hope-filled, vision-filled, view of life. How, by understanding that the fixed order he is lifting up provides structure for life and for creation. This kind of order is what makes possible moral decision making. 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 imagine 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 in 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.

Viewed this way, one can then hear in this poem a challenge to be wise and to be ethical making good decisions because God created an orderly world and life decisions have consequences. 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.

So let us see how the “Time to.....” list can help us celebrate that today is the right time, God’s time for events that we are experiencing. If life is about our plans and

things don't work out, we become upset, discouraged or angry. Life can become depressing. It can cause us to live a life devoid of much hope or optimism. We begin to focus inward on our wants and needs. These are things we feel we have some control over. Life may be one long repetitive cycle of joy and sorrow, planting and reaping, tearing down and building up until we die but we will carve out our niche.

On the other hand think about if we live today believing that this moment is a God moment. We live with the expectation that God is in the world and doing exciting and unexpected things that we are invited to be a part of. This is not saying that every moment is good and wonderful. What it is saying is that God is in the midst of our day, blessing it. Yes, as the writer said, there will be times for birth, and healing, and laughing. But also, there will be times of death, crying and losing. God is in all of life and when we can begin to embrace that what we are experience might be the time for this matter in our lives we can begin to accept it with trust and hope.

But where is the joy? With that question 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 something. 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. It focuses on today, not looking back wishing things were like they once were or longing for a different scenario for the future, but instead saying, "What is happening in my life is a God moment." This moment might be good or bad but God is with me and if I embrace that concept I can find joy.

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.

We are invited to walk with God on the journey of life. We can predict part of the future because life is orderly and so we need to make plans. We also need to understand that life is unpredictable and that change will happen. What is the right thing now may need to be torn up tomorrow. 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.

We are at the beginning of a new year. As we look ahead we need to realize there are ways to embrace the future, even if some of it is less than what we might want. We need to, each day, live fully into the moment. Remember God is in control. No matter what you are going through, expecting or fearing, this is a God moment. 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.