

September 9, 2018

Blessings – Seasons: Journeying through the Year

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 celebrates the rhythms of life. We hear how there are times to weep and laugh, to be born and to die, to keep silent and to speak and so on. I want to begin by asking you a question. How did you feel as you were hearing the scripture? This passage can elicit many different emotions. For some, it brings a sense of resignation. Every day is another page torn from our book of life; we are moving on to the grave. For others it brings a sense of inevitability. There are good things and bad things that happen. This is life. Accept it because you can't do anything about it. Many scholars believe that these feelings are at least partially behind these words for the writer goes on to say: "What gain have the workers from their toil? God has made everything suitable for its time." There are many people who live with such a pessimistic view of life. They feel the weight of the world on their shoulders and giving them any positive and uplifting views is seen as naïve.

There is another way to view the passage of time. A more positive and hope filled way of embracing our life journey. It is also found in this passage from Ecclesiastes, but you have to look for it. It is a view of life long held by the Irish. We can learn from them.

When he begins, "There is a season and a time for everything" you can hear in those words a celebration of the dependability of life. He is celebrating the rhythms of life and how God is present through those unchanging patterns. Today we are going to be challenged to see that in those rhythms there are blessings.

Did you pay attention to the poems that we have been reading throughout this service? Each one of them celebrates a season in the year. They remind us that each season has things to celebrate. There is something very comforting to this rhythm of life. As we move through the end of summer and into fall I can sense within me changing attitudes and actions. I begin to plan indoor projects as I start the process of putting my garden beds to sleep. The ice tea jug goes back into storage and the teapot comes out of hiding. There is a definite change in the rhythm of life. You don't realize how much it has become a part of how you experience life and plan your days until something goes

missing. I recall the first year that we did not have a child going off to school. That entire September felt out of whack. I kept waiting emotionally for summer to end and fall to begin. Sending the kids off to school was the switch that had told my brain fall is here. We have all experienced the comfortability of routine and felt out of sorts when it doesn't occur. This week as we contemplate the importance of the rhythms of life we can see how blessing shows up in a myriad of ways through these patterns and how, over time, the repetition gives us such joy. It is a time to say thanks.

When you begin to embrace this idea that God is with you through the seasons of life it helps you to see how this current moment fits within the bigger picture of life. We hear from Ecclesiastes that there is a time to die. All of us have experienced the pain and emptiness of losing someone we dearly love. If that was all there was to life, we would never be able to crawl out from under that crushing load of grief. But when we see it as part of the rhythms of life, that all things have their beginnings and ends, there is birth and death, tears and joys it gives us some perspective, and it allows us to move through this time of loss with hope. We have the assurance God is with us and there will be times of joy ahead.

I learned this truth from my grandfather. My mother was staying with him and my grandmother at the time our first child was born. Grandpa was dying. He and all those around him knew it. When mom shared with him that he had a great grandson he said something to the effect, "My generation has to go to make room for the ones to come." I still grieved when he passed but his death became part of a bigger picture and in it I could name the blessings of his life, his faith and God's faithfulness.

Also, this thought reminds me that there is some direction and purpose to life. Even when things are not going well, we trust in the dependability of life, that God is in charge and that we are moving forward, not randomly, but with purpose. This reminder that life has purpose is always a comfort to me. When things seem chaotic and life is out of control, I pause and remind myself of this fact. Now, we may not always see the pattern, we may not even live long enough for the resolution of the current crises, but an awareness that God is in the midst of things keeps us from total despair.

Finally, seeing God in the seasons reminds us that we are not alone. God is walking beside us every step of the way. This way of living life, celebrating the seasons and how God is in every moment, the good and tragic, the hope-filled and loss-filled gives you great strength and faith.

The Irish lived for 400 years under a brutal occupation by England. During that time, the British monarchs did their best to eradicate the culture of Ireland. They wanted to turn the Irish into a unified part of the United Kingdom. The first thing to be attacked was their religion. The Catholic faithful everywhere were held under suspicion by the British after all the bloody years of religious strife that began with King Henry VIII's abolishing the Catholic Church. During this time Henry created the Anglican Church, destroyed the monasteries and purged the Catholic churches in England of what he called idolatries. As Britain took control of Ireland they also tried to stamp out the Catholic faith there, executing priests when found, denying work to those who remained faithful, and destroying their seminaries and monasteries. The British went on to attack their native language, forbidding it to be spoken. They took away their land and gave it to the nobility of England as prizes for supporting the crown. When the famines came, the people on the land still had to produce food for England while their own children starved. Throughout all of this, they persevered. They kept the faith, they protected the priests, they continued to speak their own language in secret, and they sought help from the Irish who had left the country when their needs became great.

How could they do this in the face of all they were experiencing? It was their Celtic understanding of life. They believed there was a time for everything under heaven. Now they were going through a difficult time but it would not last. None of them realized how long it would last, but they trusted that it would go away. They knew God was with them. That God was working on their behalf and if they remained faithful, ultimately God's new purpose for them would be realized.

This faith in the rhythms of life is what made them strong. It was why, even after hundreds of years of persecution they continued on faithfully living. No matter how bad it was, they knew God was with them and another season would be coming. Today, Gaelic is one of the official languages of Ireland. The Catholic Church is the dominant faith of Ireland. And, because of the dispersions caused by persecution and famine,

there are more people who claim Irish heritage outside of Ireland than living in the country and this has led to a blossoming of the tourist trade. Yet, when we were in Ireland, as much as they were celebrating what they were currently experiencing, they did not take it for granted. Their biggest concern was that their children would fail to continue to embrace this big picture view of their unique place in history and God's place in that story. For if they lose this view then, they would say, we have lost. We will become just another part of Europe and what it means to be Irish will disappear.

So all of us need to see the blessings of the rhythms of life. Sometimes there will be great blessings but also sorrows. As we can celebrate the dependability of God, the purposefulness of God, we will find the strength and hope to live each day celebrating the season we are in and find the blessings it brings us.