

Ecclesiastes 3:1-10

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.

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

“It’s Just a Matter of Time”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Two things about the readings. First of all, you may have recognized the second one. That’s what we read last week, I thought it was so good, we ought to hear it again. On the first reading, from Ecclesiastes, I like the way it ends, and David didn’t get there, so let me tell you how it ends. “What gain have the workers have from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. God has made everything suitable for its time, moreover, God has put the sense of the past and future into their minds.” “God has put a sense of eternity into the human mind,” is how it’s translated in some places. I like that better.

I don’t remember any time being so concerned about the wind as we are this year. First, second, third hurricanes roar through the South and Texas. (Being married to a Texan, they’ll say that’s not the South, that’s Texas.) It has a lot of us checking in to learn which way the wind’s blowing, and at the church, in my office, as I sit there, I view this moving sculpture. It stands tall, it has a general appearance of a tree, it’s made of metal, it’s got a straight stem on it and a trunk. It has arms on it, and metal leaves. It’s built in such a way that it turns when the wind blows. Most of the time, as I observe it, as I’ve looked out my window, it turns in a clockwise direction. This past week there was a cold front. The wind was blowing out of the north, or it could be the presidential candidates, but it was moving in a counter-clockwise direction, and I called everybody in to see it. It probably moves in alternative directions all the time and I never noticed. Probably.

Life is like that, and it's important to note that. Things move in the manner of alternation, sometimes clockwise and sometimes counter, sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left. Life moves in alternation, sometimes to our advantage, and sometimes to our regret. There's a tension in the way life moves, and our happiness is tied to how we cope with that. It's the reason we give Bibles to third-graders. They're old enough to know, some of them even younger, they know, that things don't always add up the way they should, and they know it, and so we arm them with Bibles, because the Bible reveals the tensions, the unclarity, the collision of opposites. The Bible itself expresses the ups and downs. The Bible holds us to the fact of the alternations until we get it. In the Exodus, the high point of Israel's history, but then you've got to know about the exile, the low point. In the covenant law versus unconditional love. It's in the threat of hell and the promise of heaven. It's in the faith without question, and it's good works without reward. The Bible is a book of alternation. The cross and the empty tomb. Sin and salvation. New wine, old wineskins.

Life moves in alternation, and there's this tension in the way of life. And our happiness is tied to our realization of that and our ability to cope. Sometimes, life seems to move in the direction of the brevity of things, and sometimes life seems to call attention to the eternity of things. It's just a matter of time. Time is so important. We have to make sure that we don't waste time, we have to be careful that time doesn't get away from us, but some things take time, and we have to let them unfold in their own time. We have to be careful how we use time. Our time on earth is brief, and we want to make it count, but if we rush through our time, we will lose it, in an effort to preserve it. We're caught between the two problems, with regard to time, and with the help of the Bible. I'm going to try to resolve that, somewhat, today. It's in the Bible. You could look it up.

It was Jesus who wanted us to stop what we were doing and look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. It was Jesus who said don't worry about tomorrow, today's got its own problems. It was Paul who wrote, you don't know what time it is, it's time to wake from your sleep because the salvation is nearer than we thought, for the night is gone, the day is here. That's the brevity of time. Time is short. There's an intensity, there are things that happen. Sometimes unusual things happen, and who can predict it? There was, growing up in a mountain town, a backwater village in West Virginia, a sense of doom. We thought the Russians were coming. We believe the Soviet Union would bomb us. I remember the day we went to our history teacher in high school and asked why the Russians would bother to bomb our town, because the only serious industry in Morgantown was the Seneca Glass Company and the Sterling Faucet plant. Why would the Soviets want to blow up those two industries? We just never could quite figure how stopping the flow of martini glasses or bathtub spigots was going to turn the tide on the Cold War. Mr. Dilgard looked at us, and this is exactly what he said to a bunch of us. He said, "You idiots, don't you understand? The Russians are not going to be trying to bomb Morgantown, they're going to be aiming at Pittsburgh and they're going to miss. And you people better not take your lives and your future for granted."

We never had a hurricane, as such, go through our hometown, although the effects of it did, but we had a tornado once. It happened before my family moved there. A tornado came down the valley, wove its way through the mountains, and then there was Andrew Gilmore sitting in his bathtub admiring his new spigot made from the Sterling Faucet plant, involved in his once-a-month self-cleaning which apparently Mary Lee had insisted it was time for. There he was in his bathtub singing "What a Friend I Have in Jesus" when this twister went right through the middle of his block, tore off the roof of his house and sucked him up, in his bathtub, right up off into the air, wafted him into the center of town, and set him down in front of the courthouse. I know that's true because Judge Baker told me it was true, and that's my granddad, and he never lied. He was so frightened by what happened, he lost all sense of the fact that he was unclothed, and so grateful about it that he got himself, very soon, reborn, and I'm told he joined the Baptist church and every year on the anniversary of the tornado picking him up and putting him down, he would come down the center aisle of the church and be re-converted. And some of the members of the church thought he ought to put a sock in it, because they grew kind of tired of his story, and at one point, a few years after the tenth re-conversion, his pastor told Andrew the congregation had heard enough about the day that he was saved by Jesus, and if he couldn't think of a better epiphany, he ought to join a different church. So he became a Methodist, where people who had been converted never talked about it, and yet they knew they had been, and that's how they lived.

The brevity of time. Celebrate the day, live to the fullest. We had a funeral here recently, and at the end of the service, the daughter of the man who'd died stood up and said, "Something I want to tell you. First of all, thanks for coming. Secondly, if there's a loved one you haven't told them that you love, you tell them. If there's somebody, a friend or a loved one that you need to settle up with, do it, because you just never know. It could be too late."

There's a Chinese proverb that says, "The fifth cup of tea between friends is the best. The fifth cup of tea between friends is the best. Jack Kornfield is a Buddhist. He wrote a book. The title of the book is what I put on my sermon, it was the title of my sermon, I don't know, a couple months ago, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. That's just a great title. He quotes this Dominican nun, a friend of his, who developed an incarnational theology. This is what she said. "At age sixty, I've gone back to the simple things I learned when I was young. If I'm grading papers, I'll take the time to pray for the children whose papers I'm grading. If I'm worried about a patient in the hospital, I get out the rosary. I'm trying to enjoy everything, even the hard things, even serving in the face of injustice. This is what is given us now, and that's the truth. My life has become one of interconnectedness, the small epiphanies of each moment well lived. I don't really trust the big ones where my ego gets all puffed up. It's either here now, or we've missed it."

I like the story of the six-year-old who asks her mother what she does when she goes to the university, which she does every day. Her mother said, "I'm in the art department, and I teach people how to draw and paint." The little girl was troubled by that, and she looked at her mother and said, "You mean, they forget?" We do forget how to draw and paint, we forget our interconnectedness, we overlook the small epiphanies, we ignore the

brevity of time, the chance of a lifetime, every minute of time. Life is fleeting and precious, and there's no time to waste, and we've got to choose wisely. There's an intensity to time, it's just a matter of time, and I'm here to say it. But you see, there's more to say than that, and more we need to here. Just a matter of time, it's in the Bible, we can look it up. There's a Psalmist who said, "Lord, you've been our dwelling place in all generations, before the mountains were brought forth or ever you formed the earth or the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you're God. A hundred years in your sight is but yesterday when it's past." And then from Ecclesiastes, "For everything there's a season, a time for every matter under Heaven. A time to live and a time to die and a time to laugh and a time to cry and a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. God has made everything beautiful in its time and has put eternity into the human mind." There is a sense of eternity, and it's put into our minds, and we realize how life is supposed to unfold, and that gives us calm in the midst of it.

Rod Wilmuth is a good friend, in fact we had him preach here a couple of years ago, you may remember. He's just one of the best, I think, and he's written a book entitled *How United Methodists Show Their Faith* and in that book he tells a story on himself. "I was invited to be a guest speaker for a district conference in Nebraska in the Panhandle. I had to be at my church in the morning, and then to fly to McCook, Nebraska on the GP Express on Sunday afternoon. I'd never heard of GP Express. My doubts rose when I could not find the GP Express ticket counter at the Omaha airport. My doubts continued to rise when I saw the size of the plane, and then I heard the ticket agent ask me how much I weighed. My doubts were not removed when I discovered the ticket agent was also the pilot, as well as the copilot and the navigator. The only other passenger scheduled for the flight was a man who often visited at our church, and he began to pick up on my verbalized doubts, and he said, "Padre, aren't you the one who often quoted Jesus saying, 'I'm with you always'?" And I said to my friend, "That's not what Jesus said. He said, "Lo, I am with you always." And that's when I found out that the Lord was with us, because that plane never did get very far off the ground. In fact, as I looked out the window, I could read the headlines in the newspapers of the people sitting on their patios as they read them. That plane never got above the trees or the water towers, so "lo" Jesus was with us indeed."

When we feel the dangers, that's when we're reminded of the eternity of life. That's when we discover the patience to let life unfold, to relax. "Lo, he is with us." We don't have to get very far off the ground to see it, either. We don't have to be very long alone with our thoughts to know it, to know that when it's difficult, that's when we find the strength. To know that when we're afraid, that's when we find courage. To know that when we feel abandoned, that's when we experience God most. Eternity cures our sense of panic and our uneasiness over little matters that seemed so big.

Hillary Parson is doing a great job here at the church. Hillary works with our fifth and sixth graders in something called Club 56. They've painted up their room. They've got a room up there, you've just got to go up and see it some time, and she also works with college students, and this past week she asked Joel and me to come over on the campus. She wanted us to speak to the issue, the question, "Where was God on 9/11?" And so we

did, and we had a bunch of students there, it was really very exciting. In the part of the presentation that I put together, I tried to link some things to the bombings seven years ago, I cited the other sorts of things that have happened in our nation, when our nation had to respond. I recalled the Challenger disaster. I mentioned how, when the space shuttle blew up, just after liftoff, there was this eerie symbol left in the sky, you remember it. Who would ever forget the pattern the exploding shuttle took, and the sign and the smoke in the clear blue Florida sky, it was in the shape of a Y? The shape of a Y, it was the letter Y. And I thought then and I think now there was a message in that Y that says Yes. Yes, you keep your search alive, yes, you keep exploring, yes.

Leonard Sweet is the one who reported this. He's a preacher, the only one I've read who's reported it, it's in one of his books. He said that there is a recorded transmission the public has never heard. Just before the shuttle blew up, the Challenger crew realized that there was a leak in the fuel tank and the vibration of the shuttle, they knew their fate. One of the astronauts apparently turned to all the other astronauts, and it is recorded, and some day we'll hear it, one of the astronauts turned to the others and said, "Can we hold hands?" A bond was created, it began in the shuttle. Christa McAuliffe, the teacher, all her students aboard that space shuttle, a bond that was stronger than death. Now that's the eternal element. And I shared that story with the students on the campus this past Wednesday, and one of the students added her part to that story. She comes here to the church, she's a pre-med student. She mentioned one summer she was involved in a summer internship. It was an internship that had a name. It was called the Ronald E. McNair internship. Ron was a graduate of MIT, African-American PhD physicist. His work on carbon dioxide lasers was groundbreaking. He's a Medal of Honor award winner, and Ronald McNair was one of the astronauts who died in the Challenger explosion. And the letter Y up in the clouds, Yes, y-e-s, God wrote a statement, yes, to the risks we take, yes to the life we live, yes to the future that follows, even when we don't know what it is, even when we're afraid of it. Yes to the people who come after us. Yes to the sense of the eternal. Yes.

9/11. Seven years ago when it happened, I expect everyone in this room will remember that day. I remember hearing the radio reports. A small plane, they said, had crashed into one of the towers. I remember turning on the TV set. I remember seeing the footprint in the shape of that plane as it had hit the building, and I said out loud, "That's not a small plane." And then the second plane hit, and then the fire in the Pentagon, and the heroics that brought down the plane in Pennsylvania. When the first tower fell, I could not believe what I was seeing. And then the second. That night, we opened the doors of the church for a worship service. There was no way to announce it. We didn't announce it, we couldn't. But people came. It was an Easter crowd. And I asked that congregation in Arvada, I said, "How in the world did you know we'd be having a worship service?" And do you know what they said? They said, "Because that's why you're paid to be our preacher." In the service, there was a time of silence, and in that silence, knowing that all the airplanes were grounded, nothing permitted to fly, in that silence we heard a noise. It was an aircraft. It was a jet engine, and it was right over our church, on the outskirts of Denver. I wondered, I wondered, "Is there another attack, here in Colorado? Is that happening?" When I got home, there were two things I learned. First of all, the plane was

the plane that left the Jeffco airport, and it was from the blood bank. Long lines of people showed up to give blood, and that plane, that flew right over our church, was on the way to New York City. Secondly, in the smoking rubble there were, as you remember, those two steel beams that fell in the shape of a cross, and I thought of Jesus. And when I thought of Jesus, I could see it in his eyes. He wept, again, for all humanity. And I thought of the human spirit, and the love of God, and I thought of the eternal nature of our being. And it was then I think that we all realized that we would survive this time, and that something good would come of it. It was then we realized where God was on September 11, 2001, and all those other times when we begin to wonder where God is. God was where God always is, in the middle of a disaster, helping us pick up the pieces, reminding us of the sense of eternity, helping us find the patience, when we're afraid, to just let life unfold.

I've been thinking about the wind this past week, the hurricane Ike, the wind sculpture outside the window of my office, here at the church. Sometimes the wind blows it clockwise, and sometimes it blows it counter. To live with a sense of intensity because of the brevity of life, and to live with a sense of eternity and let life unfold. It's just a matter of time, and it's knowing God is present to us, no matter which direction the wind blows, and no matter how hard.