

A Future of Hope; Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, Jeremiah 29:10-14; Pent 11/Proper 16C

Second Presbyterian Church

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Theme: God, who is timeless, holds us and promises to give us a future of hope.

Today's second passage comes from what is considered Hebrew Bible wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes is folded in with Job and Proverbs in this genre of scriptural wisdom and we are reading perhaps the most well-known passage in all of Hebrew Scripture. Listen to what the Spirit might be saying to the church as I read from Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1-15.

Scripture

3 For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born and a time to die;

a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill and a time to heal;

a time to break down and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek and a time to lose;

a time to keep and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew;

a time to keep silent and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate;

a time for war and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ God 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. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ That which is already has been, that which is to be already is, and God seeks out what has gone by.

Sermon:

Time. Time is the one thing, as humans, we cannot create more of. It is the one thing we cannot control. The hands of the clock go around no matter how hard we might wish them to speed up or slow down. When we are waiting, time can seem endlessly slow and when we are enjoying ourselves time can speed by us.

When I first began working at Second, I was hired for 3 months at 20 hours a week. I can do this! I thought. After 3 months, I was hired for another 3 months, this time to do more things than could be done in 20 hours a week. So, I was bumped to full time. After that three months, someone said, we better extend this relationship, this time to a year. Then another. Here we are at almost three years. 3 months turned into 3 years, just like that, and what a ride. Time flies when you're have fun!

The first 8 verses of this passage from Ecclesiastes are very well known, probably because of the song Turn, Turn, Turn originally by the Byrds from 1959. The author of Ecclesiastes tells us up front that life has its seasons and all seasons have a time and a purpose, even, surprisingly, killing and war have a time and purpose in human life. Our lives contain both good and bad, sadness and joy, frivolity and seriousness, laughter and love.

What is not often read, are verses 9-15. These follow up verses include this: *God has made everything suitable for its time...I know that there is nothing better for [humans] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live* (v 11-12). God wants us to be happy and to enjoy our lives, but there will be times of struggle, of pain, of sorrow.

Why must there be difficult times? It isn't because God wants us to suffer or causes our suffering. It is precisely because we are human, and we are not God. We are flawed and broken people. We are born and we die, experiencing all the emotions in between these two poles of being. We are bound by time.

Let's face it. We don't always use our time wisely. We waste time; we misuse time; we don't appreciate the time we have. These things cause us pain, anxiety, and suffering. Wasted time causes us anxiety, while misused time can cause us and others pain and suffering.

God on the other hand is timeless. God's being knows no bounds, spatially, theologically or timely. Peter says it best in his letter titled 2 Peter, *with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day* (2 Peter 3:8). God is not bound by the things that bind us.

And so Second Presbyterian comes to this time. A time of rejoicing, a time of trepidation, a time of change. *For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose...* Now is a time of change. There have been times of breaking down, times to mourn, times to seek, times to throw away, times to lose; but now it

is time to grow, to dance, to love, to sow, to build up. It is time to move forward, to gather your stones, to take what you have learned about yourself and build for God's future. It is a communal time to embrace God's call.

And...I want to be clear. God is calling you, this congregation to be a light in a world that is often dark. Of this call, I have no doubt because I trust in God's promise made way back in a time of struggle. God says in Jeremiah:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me...and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

This exile in which Jeremiah speaks, resonates with me about the state of the Church, capital C, today. In many ways and for years the church has been declining, in members, in money, in influence, even in morality at times. Despite the words of Jeremiah, I don't believe God sent the church into exile, we caused ourselves to be there. We are in exile because the church has spent more time judging others rather than loving all people as Jesus calls us to do. We've spent more time pointing fingers at others rather than looking at ourselves.

The Good News is that it's not too late, it's never too late with God. That same letter from Peter says, *The Lord is not slow about God's promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient...* (2 Peter 3:9), and Jeremiah says, *God will bring you back (29:14),... For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope* (Jeremiah 29:11).

In the hymn we sang earlier "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" by Natalie Sleeth, she uses these profound words, *From the past will come a future; what it holds, a mystery, unrevealed until it's season, something God alone can see.* The mystery that is God is a mystery of time. A mystery we cannot know as time moves in ways we cannot expect. The beauty is that God knows and God will reveal God's mystery to us when God chooses. And our God who is love knows exactly the right time to do so.

For now and for this moment, I can say that the time I've spent with you has been precious, and in many ways healing for me. I have learned an enormous amount and you have trusted me with your lives, your stories, and your love. I have each of you and God to thank, for I believe now more than ever that God will provide both of us a future of hope in a time of change and transition.

So I leave you with one of my favorite quotes of all time used by one of my mentors before I left Cincinnati to study at Vanderbilt. It was a time of uncertainty in my own life, a time when I had no idea what God was calling me to do.

When we walk to the edge of all the light we have and take that step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe that one of two things will happen: there will be something solid for us to stand on, or we will learn to fly. (Patrick Overton)

By the grace of God, may we all learn to fly. Amen.

Jeremiah 29:10-14

or thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.