

Good dark morning from a hill in Rockport....

Is anything certain? A year ago, on Sunday, January 3, 2021, I began my “Sunday words” with that question. On this first Sunday of 2022, that’s still the question I’m pondering. How does that saying go: “Only death and taxes are certain!” After *another* year of much uncertainty, too much trauma and trial, not enough fun and fairness, it’s not a stretch to ask, “Is anything certain?”

One major difference as we begin this new year is that many of us are now vaccinated and “boosted” so to keep the covid virus at bay among us. Even so, too many have been infected, too many have died, and too many families have begun this new year with one or more members of their family not among them. Please be among the vaccinated and boosted, not the among the ones refusing to be vaccinated and thus putting themselves and all those around them at risk of becoming sick with this virus....

The “burden of uncertainty,” one of you lamented to me a year ago. Whether it is because of health concerns, other personal situations, community or national or international upheaval, or simply the slipperiness of each day, we need to learn to live with the “burden of uncertainty,” don’t you think? This is a hard task. I know I would like to look forward to more certainty about many things in 2022, wouldn’t you? But.... I’m not holding my breath on that one!

So how shall we deal with this burden? How shall we keep from becoming frozen, not only in the throws of winter weather, but in our daily handling of so much uncertainty all around us? I believe our text for this morning’s sermon, Ecclesiastes 3:1-13, a text that calls to us each first Sunday of the year, offers us a roadmap to follow on this unmapped, winding, and unnerving journey we take each day. We are fortunate to wake up to experience these days, no matter what lies ahead. “To everything there is a season....” the text begins.

And... not but, **and**, in every season there is certainty and uncertainty. The second half of the first verse reads, “**and** a time for every matter under heaven.” (Eccl 3:1) Sometime in this past year it was brought to my attention that it makes a difference if I say, “but so and so....” rather than “and so and so....” “But” implies the opposite, usually the negative, response to the first half of the sentence.

Stay with me here.... If I say, “Winter is nasty, *but* Summer is great,” I’m opposing one to the other. If I say, “Winter is nasty, *and* Summer is great,” I’m not opposing them, I’m acknowledging them both without negative judgment. Once I started replacing, “but” with “and” in many opinions I’ve expressed this past year, my

internal “judgment meter” flipped from negative to at least considering an alternative that was not quite so negative. Perhaps this seems convoluted, but I suggest you try it in 2022. Every time you include a “....., but” in your words, change the but to and..... See what a difference it makes!

So, we carry a burden of uncertainty with us each day about many things, AND, not BUT, AND we can carry that burden lightly.... or as if it is a dead weight around our shoulders. Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 invites us to remember “for everything there is a season, **and** a time for every matter under heaven.” Let us carry those matters lightly, again this year as we have since March 15, 2020 when this covid crisis first hit us all....

Blessings to each one this first Sunday of 2022! Susan

p.s. Remember that for January and February we will be gathering for worship in Leach Hall downstairs rather than in our sanctuary – it’ll help keep the oil bills down, don’t you know! Dress warmly for church on these Sundays, as we will plan to keep the door slightly ajar to keep the air flow moving as we continue to be wary of covid germs around us....

p.s.s. And a reminder again that I will be taking some vacation time this coming week, beginning tomorrow and going through next Sunday, January 9. Rev. Marti Garrison will be with you next Sunday to lead worship and preach. I will take a break from writing meditations this coming week, but will send out this morning’s sermon later today, via the church’s Facebook page, the Federated Church of Thomaston, and my Facebook page, freerangepastor. Thanks for holding down the “church fort” while I take a few days to regroup and charge my internal batteries!

“For everything there is a season....”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, January 2, 2022
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

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.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

What gain have the workers 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 a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13

“To everything there is a season....”
A sermon based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Will you pray with me. Eternal God, creator and protector over the past, the present and the future, be with us as we ponder who you are and who we are in your midst on this first Sunday of 2022. Amen.

"Life is just an eternal round of events."^[1] I'll say that again, "Life is just an eternal round of events." Oh, how I wish I could say those were *my* wise words! But they are the words of O. S. Rankin, a Scottish theology professor who lived in the first half of the 20th century. "Life is just an eternal round of events." Rankin was writing a commentary about the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

I've been pondering the wisdom of Ecclesiastes recently as I've thought about the coming year and all the changes that have taken place in our country and around the world since March, 2020. We are in a time of turmoil like we've not seen in our time, at least in MY time anyway! Those of you who lived through World War II may not agree entirely, but even so, I have talked with many of you who think we're in a very jumbled and unsettling state of affairs as we enter 2022.

So where do we turn when looking for some answers to the chaotic state we're in?

How do we make sense of what some days seems to make no sense at all?

Is there any way we can find some joy in the midst of what feels like continual dread and despair to a lesser or greater degree due to the covid crisis in our midst, and the political and social turmoil in the news every single day?

Some turn to the Bible for comfort and reassurance in tough times. I turn to the 23rd Psalm when I'm flying and turbulence abounds. I'm not sure when I'll ever fly again considering our current situation, but in times of past flying turbulence I've repeated this mantra over and over, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.... If it's time to go, it's time to go.... The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.... If it's time to go, it's time to go...."

But how about the more complex and challenging moments of our personal lives, like when a new medical diagnosis is pronounced.... or a job is lost.... or a relationship is ended.... or a loved one of any age dies and leaves us feeling alone.... Almost weekly now, I learn of another person with whom I had some connection in my past life in one way or another who has contracted the corona virus or died from complications of it.

And then there are those times in our communal lives when we can't find any good answers to those pesky and profound questions about basic human values.... like morality, ethics, justice, fairness and equality, or even recognizing basic compassion and care and respect for one another, no matter our obvious, or hidden, differences.

I've been pondering all of these moments in recent weeks and months. I believe you have, too. And as I've thought about how I want to offer you some words of comfort or understanding or acceptance as we begin this new year, I've struggled with what biblical texts to consider.

This morning, coincidentally enough!, Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 is the Old Testament text given in the Revised Common Lectionary for New Year's Day! How timely....

"For everything there is a season; and a time for every matter under heaven...." (Eccl 3:1) Many of us know this passage, not because we learned of it from a biblical study of Ecclesiastes, but because we remember Pete Seeger's song, "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)". He wrote this song in the late 1950's. "The lyrics, except for the title which is repeated throughout the song and the final two lines, are adapted word-for-word from the English version of the first eight verses of the third chapter of the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes....

The biblical text posits there being a time and place for all things: laughter and sorrow, healing and killing, war and peace, and so on. The lines are open to myriad interpretations, but Seeger's song presents them as a plea for world peace because of the closing line: 'a time for peace, I swear it's not too late.' This line and the title phrase "Turn! Turn! Turn!" are the only parts of the lyric written by

Seeger himself. The song is notable for being one of a few instances in popular music in which a large portion of the Bible is set to music."^[2]

In a commentary on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, theologian Amy Plantinga Pauw asks, "Why Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? Why Now?" in her Introduction. These words jumped out at me from her commentary, "An Invitation to the Religiously Disaffected.... Ecclesiastes made it into the canon by the skin of its teeth. Precisely the features of Ecclesiastes that imperiled its acceptance into the canon [that's the official Bible] -- its ambiguities and contradictions, its voicing of radical doubts -- have endeared it to many subsequent biblical readers. Qohelet [ko-HELL-it], the renegade wisdom teacher of Ecclesiastes, is not afraid to question received religious commonplaces, not afraid to say out loud that life experience and theological convictions sometimes clash.

When sudden disaster makes us feel like 'fish taken in a cruel net' (Eccl 9:12), when the ironies and perplexities of life pile up, Ecclesiastes is a welcome biblical companion, a freethinker within the canon of Scripture.... Qohelet [ko-HELL-it] was a seeker and gives voice to the seekers of our own day, who also exhibit a passionate search for wisdom without a confidence in communal structures to guide the way.... The honesty and practicality of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs are appealing to seekers and veteran Christians alike."^[3]

Maybe particularly now, when everything still seems upside down and totally out of kilter, what we need is a spiritual jump start into a fresh understanding of just how helpful and reassuring the words of the Bible can be.... if only we consider them again, as if for the first time, for this NEW time in our personal lives and in our communal life in this country. Are you with me?

Qohelet [ko-HELL-it] writes in Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes, "What gain have the workers 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 a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil." (Eccl 3:9-13)

And those closing words of this text from Ecclesiastes lead me back to verse five of the text, "a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." We are told by the medical and scientific community we must not embrace one another physically right now in order to help stem the contagious tide of this deadly

virus. We are an embracing people. This is hard. I know we long for the embraces of one another on Sunday mornings once again. I know we long for the embraces of friends and family. We long to touch and be touched. So now, in 2022, it's time to embrace one another for a while longer with words, with smiles behind masks, with written embraces in cards, text messages, and e-mails, with Zoom gatherings, and whatever other ways we can create to embrace one another with our spirits if not with our arms.

We will get through this challenging time, even with so many lost to the corona virus, if we can remember this holy logic, "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in their toil." (Eccl 3:13) May we take pleasure in and from all our efforts as we begin this new year remembering, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...." (Eccl 3:1)

Let the people say, "Amen."

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, January 2, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lectors: the congregation

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.

An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*

***Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude Sabbath Prayer from "Fiddler on the Roof"

Call to Worship

Pastor: God of grace, we come to worship today so that we might be held in community in spirit.

People: We come to be cared for in our sorrows and to share our joys, and to ponder what is to come and honor what is past.

All: We come with thankful hearts to join the saints of the church past, present, and future in singing praise to God and worshipping God as we welcome the new year!

***Opening Hymn** “Angels from the Realms of Glory” 220 Blue Hymnal

A Responsive Reading “The Demand of Yesterday” (see insert)

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 (see insert)

***Gloria Patri No. 70 Glory Be to the Father....**

Message “To everything there is a season....” Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** “Be Still, My Soul” 534 Blue Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord’s Prayer.....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory Fantasia on the hymn tune Dix) "As with Gladness Men of Old, did the Guiding Star Behold."

***Doxology No. 95 Blue Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow....**

***Prayer of Dedication**

Service of Holy Communion (see insert)

***Closing Hymn** “Pass It On” 572 Blue Hymnal

Benediction

Postlude Chorale from "Finlandia" -- Sibelius

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, January 9, 2022

Guest preacher – Rev. Marti Garrison

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“Kohleth [the writer of Ecclesiastes], is a skeptic. But the subject of his contentings – life and how best to use and appraise it – lies at the heart of all religions, for each of them to provide in its own way an answer.” ~ O. S. Rankin in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 5, 1956

Prayer List -- Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far.... And add a prayer for Tammy Whirly, a friend of Margie’s, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Kristin Parker O’Neal, Jo Ann Parker’s daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, BJ Thomson & family of Mimi’s Uncle Doug, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy’s granddaughter.... **Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email freerangepastor@gmail.com to add or drop the names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She’s always glad to have a chat with you! Remember that she is taking some vacation time from tomorrow, Monday, January 3 through Sunday, January 9! Rev. Marti Garrison will be with you next Sunday, January 9!**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thursday-1/6/22.....10:00-2:00 pm: Quilters
Sunday-1/9/22.....9:30 am: Worship Services
Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Pasta

Reminders for next Sunday, 1/9/22

Deacon for January, 2022: Corinne Ervin

Greeter/Usher: Dave

Billheimer

Lector: Kathleen

Anderson

F

lowers:

Collection Total for Sunday, December 26, 2021:

Pledges - \$ 380.00

Loose - \$ 163.00, \$100 of which is in memory of Hank

Carey

Total - \$ 543.00

The 2021 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

^[1]O. S. Rankin, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 5, New York & Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956, p. 5.

^[2]en.wikipedia.org for Turn! Turn! Turn!

^[3]Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 9-10.