

Good Sunday morning from a cold hill in Rockport.....

Is anything certain? On this first Sunday of 2021, that's the question I'm pondering. How does that saying go: "Only death and taxes are certain!" After a 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 of you wrote to me this past week, in regard to dealing with family challenges because of health matters of one family member, about the "burden of uncertainty." 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 2021, 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, 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, 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 2021. 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 this year....

I know I've said this before, but **(no, AND)** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, but **(no, AND)** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them....

Blessings to all on this second Sunday after Christmas in the Christian tradition..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT to download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in.... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermons to Federated's Facebook page....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, January 3, 2021
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

Whoever you are, and whatever you are carrying in your heart today –
joy, stress, grief, anger, loneliness, relief –
know that you are welcome here in this cyberspace time of worship.

Today is a new day, this is a new year.

May the presence of God's spirit in our lives renew our dreams for a renewed world.

Let us worship God!

**New Year's Resolutions to consider for 2021....
(with scriptural references!)**

- * May I live my own life this year and not attend to anyone else's.
(Proverbs 26:17; 1 Timothy 5:13)
- * May I not judge others that I may not be judged either.
(Romans 2:1; James 4:11)
- * May I remember that gossip damages relationships and communities.
(Exodus 23:1; Proverbs 16:28, 26:20)
- * May I not presume that I know the whole of someone else's story.
(Proverbs 18:13)
- * May I remember that just because someone says something is fact, it may not be true. (Proverbs 14:15; 2 Timothy 2:23)
 - * May I not seek revenge when I believe I have been wronged.
(Proverbs 15:1; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)
- * May I respect the privacy of others and expect the same in return.

(Titus 3:2)

- * May I strive to forgive others and ask for forgiveness myself.
(Matthew 7:12; Ephesians 4:32)
- * May I live life as if my glass is half full, not half empty.
(1 Thessalonians 4:10-11; Romans 12:2)
- * May I learn from the past, live in the present, and look forward to the future.
(Philippians 4:8-9)

A Reading of 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.

What gain have the workers from their toil?

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

He has made everything suitable for its time;

moreover he 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.

“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 2021. 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 and Proverbs recently as I've thought about the coming year and all the changes that are about to take place in our country with a new administration in Washington and a changing view of our country around the world. 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 2021.

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. The robust communal setting of Proverbs' quest for wisdom is missing in Ecclesiastes. 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 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 2021, 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."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus 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 who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our President that he might do the right things in coming weeks for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers, for “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance, and continued prayers for Hank Cary, Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.*

A Benediction

*May God bless you and keep you.
May God’s face radiate upon you
and flood you with grace and tender mercies.
May God smile upon you always
and cover your life with peace.
Amen.*

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

Sunday, January 10, 2021 – honoring the Epiphany & the Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Words to ponder today about “embracing”.....

“The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings.” ~ Martin Buber

“There is so much division in this world. So what is reach the path of healing? It can begin in this moment, by embracing the life that’s here.” ~ Tara Brach

“I grew up in an inner city neighborhood called the Benson Hurst section of Brooklyn, which was a very embracing, warm, family-type neighborhood.” ~ Anthony Fauci

“When it all boils down, it’s about embracing each others’ stories and maybe even finding that synergy to collaborate for the common good.” ~ Dhani Jones

“Life is all about embracing each moment that is given to you.” ~ Evangeline Lilly

^[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.