

"For everything there is a season..."
A Sermon for the Federated Church
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, December 30, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Left: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
Right: There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth:
Left: A time to be born, and a time to die,
Right: A right time for birth and another for death,
Left: A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted,
Right: A right time to plant and another to reap,
Left: A time to kill, and a time to heal,
Right: A right time to kill and another to heal,
Left: A time to break down, and a time to build up,
Right: A right time to destroy and another to construct,
Left: A time to weep, and a time to laugh,
Right: A right time to cry and another to laugh,
Left: A time to mourn, and a time to dance,
Right: A right time to lament and another to cheer,
Left: A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together,
Right: A right time to make love and another to abstain,
Left: A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing,
Right: A right time to embrace and another to part,
Left: A time to seek, and a time to lose,
Right: A right time to search and another to count your losses,
Left: A time to keep, and a time to throw away,
Right: A right time to hold on and another to let go,
Left: A time to tear, and a time to sew,
Right: A right time to rip out and another to mend,
Left: A time to keep silence, and a time to speak,
Right: A right time to shut up and another to speak up,
Left: A time to love, and a time to hate,
Right: A right time to love and another to hate,
Left: A time for war, and a time for peace.
Right: A right time to wage war and another to make peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

* Left -- New Revised Standard Version of the Bible;

Right -- Eugene Peterson's, The Message

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

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 Sunday before the beginning of the near year. 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 over the past year or two, as I've thought about each coming year and all the chaos in our country 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, and think I'm being overly dramatic about our current state of affairs. But even so, when I talk with friends and colleagues, we all seem to agree we're in a very jumbled and unsettling state of affairs at the moment.

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?

And for all of you, unexpectedly searching for a new settled pastor now that Vanessa has moved to a new pastorate in another state.... Adapting to change, whether expected or not, is not an easy journey, is it?

Some turn to the Bible for comfort and reassurance in challenging times. I turn to the 23rd Psalm when I'm flying and turbulence abounds. "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...." and so my mantra goes when I try to convince myself that "bumpy air" is just like a bumpy road in Maine!

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....

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 don't know about you, but I've been pondering all of these moments in recent months. And so now I think about about how I want to offer you some words of comfort or understanding or acceptance in these coming six months as I serve as your interim pastor.

At first, I thought I could just go back through eighteen years of sermons I've delivered, and repeat them for you with some tweaking and updating.... but.... I don't want to do that. That would be like cheating on you.... and on me, too....

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....

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

The biblical text [imagines] 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 lyrics 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 Amy Plantinga Pauw's commentary on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes she asks, "Why Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? Why Now?" in her Introduction. These words grabbed me, "An Invitation to the Religiously Disaffected.... Ecclesiastes made it into the canon [that's the official Bible] by the skin of its teeth. Precisely the features of Ecclesiastes that imperiled its acceptance into the canon -- 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 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

More and more I'm finding people "religiously disaffected" these days.... I have to confess I find *myself* more "religiously disaffected" than I would like some days. Maybe I've just tired in this, my seventieth year. Maybe my cynical side is turn, turn, turning into my only side. Maybe what I 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 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)

Let's toil with texts from the Bible, full of wisdom for our chaotic times, between now and the end of June. Let's eat and drink of the holy meals we'll share in this time. Let's not forget, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." (Eccl 3:1) And remember, "Life is just an eternal round of events."

Let the people say, "Amen."

²en.wikipedia.org for Turn! Turn! Turn!

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