

"For everything there is a season..."
A reflection for "vespers with a free range pastor"
Lincolville, Maine
Sunday, June 24, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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*

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 the midst of the tensions of our time. Amen.

"Life is just an eternal round of events."¹ I'll say that again, "Life is just an eternal round of events." I wish I could say those were *my* wise and prophetic words! But they are the words

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

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 wrote a commentary about the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

I've been pondering the wisdom of Ecclesiastes since I decided to make the theme for this first vespers service "new beginnings." 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 might think I'm being overly dramatic about our current state of affairs. But much of the news and our everyday conversations seem to revolve around the very jumbled and unsettling state of affairs in our country at the moment.

So where do we turn when looking for some answers, or at the very least some understanding, of the chaotic state we're in?

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

How we can find some joy and sense of peace in the midst of what feels like constant chaos and bitterness and continual finger pointing at "the other guy" causing all our problems in our country?

Some of us turn to the Bible for comfort and reassurance in tough times. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is often read at memorial services. In fact, it's been a part of several memorial services I've lead over the past month. Around the time of a loved one's death, the sentiment expressed in Chapter 3, Verse 2, "a time to be born, and a time to die," can be comforting.

As many of you know, 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 Lincolnville!

But how about the more complex and challenging moments of our 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.... or the national news tells us of children being separated from their parents at our southern border and housed in detention centers?

There are times in our communal lives when we can't seem to find any good answers to those pesky and profound questions about basic human values.... 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 of life style or culture.

I don't know about you, but I've been pondering all of these moments in recent weeks, and wondering what I can do or say that might offer some relief or at least a moment of understanding in the midst of so much that is almost incomprehensible in this country.

Then I try to remember, "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.... our scripture reading for this evening.

The biblical text [suggests] 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

I had us read our text for this evening from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and from Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*. There's an interesting twist to Peterson's interpretation of this text. Where the NRSV translation says, "a time, a time, a time....," Peterson uses the words, "a right time, a right time, a right time...." Can you catch the difference in possible meaning? The NRSV words suggest acceptance of this and of that, of this and of that. Peterson's words propose there's a right time and "another" time, a right time and "another" time. More than acceptance is implied.... an appeal for making a decision is called for.

So here's the question for this evening -- when is the right time to accept something as it is or try to change it? When is the right time to keep silent or speak out? How do we make that determination? Any ideas? (get responses)

I answer that question for myself this way -- What gives me a lump in my throat or brings tears to my eyes? What makes my heart beat faster or my hands shake when I hear of an injustice or a mistreatment of a child or an animal? What gets me to write a check in support of an important cause, or go to a rally in support of an issue or in response to an unfairness, or go visit someone in a nursing home when I'd rather stay home and read a book for pleasure? There is a rally at the State House this coming Saturday, June 30th at 11 a.m. in support of more humane treatment for families seeking asylum in our country. I do plan to be there. Maybe you'll want to join me....

Yes, there are some matters of life about which we can do nothing but accept them -- a difficult medical diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a time to hold on to good memories and let go of difficult or sad memories. But new beginnings are to happen, whether we want them to or not, yes? Life IS just an eternal round of events. Our challenge, I believe, is to greet each one of those new beginnings as part of the eternal round of events of each of our lives. The comforting part of all of that, to me, is that we share in those new beginnings with one another.... we reach out and do whatever we can to gladden one another's hearts in the midst of it all....

Does anyone want to share some thoughts about new beginnings?

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

Shared by Lisa C –

NEW BEGINNINGS

The moon rolls out of celestial sight
Dawn stretches above the tree line
Fiddleheads unfurl
A wet fawn wobbles at her mother's knees
Caterpillars nestle in their tree tents
A wren fashions her home of twigs

A thick straight stick becomes my walking staff
and I go forth
into yet another spring

Baptized by rain
I am reborn

New Beginnings
as it was in the beginning
is now
and ever shall be
hopefully
longingly
lovingly
miraculously
World without end
Amen

How long will I behold
this endless cycle
until I exhale for the last time

Does it matter
as long as I believe
in new beginnings