

First Presbyterian Church
Ecc. 3:1-14, “Accepting Our Times, Accepting Our Selves”
By Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/30/2025

Over this past week, I found myself asking, “Why are we still in Ecclesiastes?”

This book is ... pretty brutal and dark, and I’m not sure that’s what I need
or what the congregation needs right now. Maybe this was a bad idea.
So why are we still here on the 4th week of Lent?

I had to go back and remember how we got started:

This book is a unique conversation partner within the Bible
which offers counter testimony to the typical perspectives
that we get from other voices in the Bible.

The Jews have a tradition of reading the Book of Ecclesiastes
(which they call the Book of Kohelet) one time every year
during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Some Rabbis believe this practice reminds people not to
focus on amassing too much wealth, brings humility,
and avoids getting the “light headed feeling”
that comes from too much ... joy.

(Gotta watch out for too much joy.)

Ecclesiastes is a reminder that we aren’t alone if we think
life seems unpredictable and all our efforts and toil feel like
chasing after the wind.

This book frees us from the illusion that we can (and therefore should)
control what happens in the world.

So we should listen to the Teacher (known as Qohelet) with frank honesty,
without trying to force his words into something sunny and warm.
From there, we can move through Qohelet’s wisdom
toward what we know of God in Christ.

A second question that a number of people have asked me is,
“What in the world is this metal thing in front of the communion table?”
The answer is ... well, I’m not entirely sure.

But I *think* it’s a sun dial.

Which connects to Qohelet’s favorite phrase, “everything under the sun.”
It also connects to times and seasons,
and to the overall series title, “To Everything a Season.”

Today, finally, we get to the passage that phrase comes from,
easily the most well-known passage from Ecclesiastes,
famously used by the Byrds
for their anti-war anthem, “turn, turn, turn.”

Beginning with “A time to be born, a time to die,”
Qohelet lists off 14 pairs of polar opposites
which come our way in life.

There is something deeply compelling about the breadth of life
that is encompassed in these pairs.

There are some which remind me of specific moments in my life.

There are others which make me feel ... uncomfortable.

My instinct is to read this list as times that God
desires or supports, so I get uncomfortable when I read,

“For everything there is a season ...”

a season for war? a season to kill? a season to hate?

So I jump in to save God from apparent injustice:

“No it’s not that God wants war, killing, and hate ... but ...

maybe there are wars we cannot avoid,

maybe there’s a time to kill things metaphorically,

maybe we are to hate things that go against God’s kingdom...”

But I don't think we need to save God from this passage.

To say that there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven
is merely to say that in our lives, such times inevitably come.
And not only just the times that are listed,
but also the great spectrum of experience between one pole and the other.

There's a time to be born, a time to die, and a time for everything in between.
There will be seasons of peace, seasons of war,
and every increment of relationship along that spectrum.
These seasons come and go and time marches on
relentlessly, cycling through these changes
no matter what we do.

God has set eternity in our hearts ...
we quest after knowledge and understanding that is beyond us,
our minds rove endlessly forward and back
across the times we live in,
trying to connect with something greater than ourselves.

And if this is what Qohelet is getting at, then when a season of life comes our way,
we don't get very far by asking "Why is this happening?"
If there is a time to weep and a time to laugh,
and times to laugh through our tears,
then these times don't necessarily come our way
for a particular reason. They just come our way.

"Stuff happens." (My paraphrase of a bumper sticker.)

What if we learned to accept the times and seasons of life for what they are,
rather than seeking to float above them?
Rather than seeking to explain them?
Rather than hoping to extend the ones we prefer
and resist the ones we'd rather avoid?

Kristen Neff is a psychologist who specializes in self-compassion.

Her work has been very helpful to me because I am not always
very compassionate to myself.

Part of being compassionate to ourselves
is accepting what is happening in the present moment,
in a given time or season of life.
Accepting...without making judgments about good or bad.

She writes that “resistance to rush-hour traffic might look like this:
*Dang it! The freeway is in total gridlock.
I’m going to be late for dinner again! And I can’t believe
that stupid jerk just tried to cut in front of me from the on-ramp.
I’m so sick of this I want to scream!!!”*

On the other hand, acceptance might look like this:
*“Stuck in traffic yet again. Well, given that it’s almost rush hour
I guess that’s to be expected.
I’m certainly not going to get home any faster
by being upset about it.”*

Or ... “For everything there is a season.
A time to get home quickly and a time to be stuck in traffic.”
See the connection?

The American mindfulness teacher Shinzen Young says that
“suffering = pain x resistance.”

If there is a time for everything under heaven,
then when those times come, they may cause us pain –
or they may cause us joy, or something in between.
But when we resist our pain and try to escape our times,
we experience suffering (that doesn’t change anything).

The great biblical scholar Derek Kidner relates that

“Instead of frozen perfection there is the kaleidoscopic movement
of innumerable processes, each with its own character
and contributing to the over-all masterpiece
which is the work of one Creator.

We see enough to recognize something of its quality,
but the grand design escapes us, for we can never stand back far enough
to view it as its Creator does, whole and entire,
from the beginning to the end.”

The wisdom of Qohelet, then, is to accept our times.

Acceptance can come through contemplative encounter
with the Spirit of God, through being more mindful and intentional
rather than giving into reactive, compulsive, and controlling impulses.

If you enjoy your times, then be glad! And if you don't, then remember
that this, too, shall pass.

Some people will hear words like “accept” and “contemplative” and think,
“Oh, so you just sit back and watch the world burn?
Do we just ‘accept’ abuse? Do we ‘accept’ injustice?
Are you saying that the really spiritual thing is to just
“be contemplative” while people we love are hurt
without doing anything about it?”

This is a good question. And it is a difficult one to answer.

Acceptance does not equal approval,
and contemplation does not equal inaction.

Acceptance is not approval:

If we accept our times, it means we acknowledge reality as it comes.
It means we don't depend on positive spin or wishful thinking.

What is happening is happening.

We face it head on, because there is a time for every purpose under heaven.

We can take this perspective without approving of what we experience,
without endorsing our times,
without thinking that God endorses our times.

Far from some blasé resignation,
acceptance of our times helps us move away from rage and frustration
that get us nowhere. Acceptance can help us to see
where the Spirit of God is pointing us,
which can be quite different from our knee-jerk reactions.

We see this in the life of Jesus.

He accepted that Rome occupied Israel,
that he wouldn't be a Messiah with a great army sitting on a throne,
that he couldn't change the minds of powerful people
who oppressed the poor,
and that gathering large crowds to fuel a political movement
wouldn't bring the salvation which God planned for Israel, humanity,
and all creation. Jesus accepted his times as Qohelet suggests,
and knew the heavy burden that God has laid on humans
who struggle through life in so many ways.

But Jesus also told the people, **“The time is fulfilled,
the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.”**

The time ... is fulfilled. While we cannot change our times, God can. And God has.
We live in the time between the times
of the Messiah's first arrival on earth
and the Messiah's final arrival which will make all things new.

We can accept our times when we know we are held by the One who
has a plan for this crazy world, and who knows the end from the beginning.

How do we do that?

Well, four weeks ago, I invited everyone to share in a spiritual practice for Lent
of praying the 23rd Psalm every morning,
praying the Lord's Prayer at lunchtime,
and prayerfully reviewing your day every evening.

Maybe you've tried this, maybe you haven't.
Maybe it has stuck and maybe you've forgotten.
But no matter: we are not done with this season of Lent.

If you are anxious about your times, remember God and your connection to others
through these prayers at different times of the day. See what God will do.

For today, we can select a few of the times listed by Qohelet in Ecc. 3
which you see emerging in your life and your world.
And then give them over to God.

Read the Times:

“God, These are my times, and there's little I can do to change them. I try to make sense of them, but I can't. Even so, I believe that you sent us Jesus who ushered in a new era, a season of the Spirit which surpasses all others. Join us with the life of Christ that we may be among the things that you make beautiful in their time.”