

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
September 24, 2023

## **Seasonality**

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

When I look back at last Sunday's bulletin cover, I see that my timing could have been better. Had I taken an advance look before she began printing, I could have asked Jenny, our church secretary, to use a different cover last week and to hold on to this one for today's service. Its text and imagery correspond directly with our sermon text. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (v. 1).

This is how the best-known passage in Ecclesiastes begins. It's a list of things for which there is a proper time. But it's more than just a list. It's a way of describing what it means to be mortal. Human mortality drives so much of what the writer of Ecclesiastes, often called the Teacher, has to say. According to him, we live out our days under the sovereignty of a God who is cloaked in obscurity. God, in his eternity, orders the affairs of his creation, and we time-bound creatures are wise to find our place within the divine purpose. As one commentator has put it, "The wise person's task evidently is to know when the right time has come and to move visibly with whatever invisible program there may be."<sup>1</sup>

Within that invisible divine program, we mortals enter into and experience a whole range of experiences. Birth and death, weeping and laughing, love and hate, sorrow and joy, war and peace—all these, and so many more, are part of our unfolding lives. And notice that the Teacher doesn't speak of these primarily as just moments, episodes, or instances. The Teacher refers to them as "times" and "seasons." In other words, our lives take shape within, and move through, periods that have their own feel, impact, and requirements. Our lives are a succession of times and seasons that fit within a larger whole.

The same is true of the communities that we're part of, including our community of faith. Last Sunday, as we celebrated our church's anniversary, part of what we did was recall and retell our congregation's story in terms of chronology. Sixty-five years. And within that six and a half decades, significant dates when the church held its first Sunday service, when it was officially constituted, when it broke ground on a facility of its own, when it added to the building, when it called a particular pastor, when the day care center began, when a particular program was launched, and so on. In this respect, we charted our congregation's course by where we were on the calendar. What month, what day, what year.

But who we are and what we're all about involves more than just where our church was or is on the historical clock. We can also think of our congregation and tell its story in terms of times and seasons. Times of birth/growth and times of decline. Times of mourning and times of rejoicing. Times of endings and times of new beginnings. Times of building and times of dismantling. Times of abundance and times of scarcity. Times of intense labor and times of rest. Times of unity and times of division. Times of despair and times of hope. And when we reflect on recent years, especially our journey through COVID-19, perhaps we can speak of a season of scattering and a season of regathering. This all goes to demonstrate that our church's life has been more than just a progression, year by year, to

where we are now. It has been, and continues to be, an unfolding succession of seasons taking shape under the sovereignty of God.

In this way, our lives, individually and together, are similar to the patterns and rhythms of the larger creation. Marshall Shelley tells about a time when he and his wife visited her family in Kansas. Her father was a farmer. He had spent a lifetime raising wheat, corn, milo, and beef, as well as some sheep and chickens. One morning when Shelley was following his father-in-law around the farm, the two of them talked about the differences between city living and a rural lifestyle. The farmer said:

Most city folks I know expect each year to be better than the last. They think it's normal to get an annual raise, to earn more this year than you did last year. As a farmer, I have good years and bad years. It all depends on rain at the right time, dry days for harvest, and no damaging storms. Some years we have more; some years we have less.

According to Shelley,

It was one of those indelible moments of stunning clarity. And that “law of the harvest”—some years being fat and others being lean—applies to much more than agriculture. Growing in spiritual maturity requires gratefully accepting the “seasons of more” and the “seasons of less” that God weaves into specific areas of our lives—our friendships, marriage, career, finances, ministry, and spiritual growth.<sup>2</sup>

Even though most of us aren't farmers, there is something about this time of the year that draws us into deeper engagement with the rhythms of the land that we occupy and the seasonality of the created world. We expect temperatures to cool and leaves to begin changing colors. In fact, it throws us off a bit when we see some leaves turning brown and dropping early, probably due to dry weather and heat stress. It feels like those trees and their leaves are getting ahead of time. After all, the rest of September and all of October are still ahead of us. There will be plenty of time for a gradual transition to red, orange, and yellow foliage. We need this kind of predictability. It helps us navigate through time and live with a sense of stability.

It also helps us live according to an order and structure that's beyond our control, that isn't subject to our own limited sense of an appropriate time. Author Francine Rivers wrote a devotional on part of today's text, in which she reflects on God's timing. She says,

We have a dogwood tree in our backyard. A few springs ago, all the others in the neighborhood were blooming in their pink and white glory while mine was still sleeping in the corner.

I thought the dogwood was dead. I gave it a closer look and discovered it had new growth coming, the promise of something happening. I wanted to shake it a little and wake it up, but I settled for talking: “Come on! Pretty please. Bloom! We're leaving soon on a trip and I don't want to miss your show.” It snoozed on.

The friend who house-sat for me during our trip had the pleasure of the dogwood's beautiful display. Maybe the timing wasn't just right for me, but it was for her.<sup>3</sup>

Learning how to let our lives track with God's time is part of what we learn by observing and following the changing seasons, whether we're watching leaves in the fall or a dogwood in the spring.

In the other main section of our text, verses 9-15, the Teacher continues to explore the rhythm and rightness of time, only in a less poetic way. He says, “What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made

everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (vv. 9-11). So the Teacher raises a question and then offers his answer. He says that all our human striving and endeavor unfold within God’s purposes, and that God will bring his creation to fruition in time. In God’s providential plan, history has a direction, a finality that God will accomplish. And God has given us a sense of having a place, a part, in the unfolding of his creative purposes. He has “set eternity in the human heart” (v. 11). Or as another translation renders it, God has “put a sense of past and future” into our minds. That’s the good news.

The bad news is that, as the Teacher says, “no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (v. 11). In his sovereignty, God has withheld this kind of knowledge from us. We’re mortal creatures, and our horizon of understanding is limited. We can’t see the whole or have God’s perspective. But that’s not something we should resent or that should lead us to despair. Our finitude, our inability to see the big picture, actually helps keep us in a state of awe and reverence, dependent on God for meaning and purpose.

The Teacher goes on to say that in this relationship where we can’t comprehend the big picture, God has provided us with bounded time and space in which to live and work and experience happiness. “I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God” (vv. 12-13). I like the way that James K. A. Smith puts it when he says, “The Teacher’s counsel is provocative, even table-turning: lean into your creaturehood; live into your temporality; dig into your toil. There are gifts you might never have imagined: pleasure, happiness, joy.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Smith, being faithful followers of Jesus means that we need to practice what he calls “spiritual timekeeping” which, among other things, means learning how to live as creatures embedded in time. Each of us needs to be asking, on a regular basis, “*When* am I?”<sup>5</sup> That means more than just looking at the calendar to see what day it is or checking the clock to see what time it is. It means reflecting on the season of life where you’re currently located. What time is it in my life? What season am I in?

Gregory Spencer has written about how much our American culture values efficiency, and what that means for our understanding of time. He says:

Time: we march against it, beat it, save it, manage it, spend it, and try not to kill it or waste it. If efficiency becomes a dictator instead of a servant, generosity is usually oppressed. We feel we must fill days with industrious busyness.

When my daughters were young, I too frequently bemoaned how little time I could give to writing. One friend said, “Your girls will only be toddlers once. Don’t worry so much about being productive.” Another friend gestured to my daughters and said, “Spence, *here* are your publications!” These friends encouraged me to view time ... by the opportunity presented, time according to what the season calls for. Time well used ... is time that appropriately meets the needs of the moment, not ... time measured by the demands of the clock.<sup>6</sup>

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” That calls for you and me and our congregation to practice spiritual discernment. We need God, who alone sees and knows the big picture, to help each of us see what our place, our task, and our role is, in the here and now. To gain clarity about what’s expected and required of us, and what our priorities should be, in this moment. To know how to live wisely is this season of your life, and in this season of our church’s life.

<sup>1</sup> W. Sibley Towner, “The Book of Ecclesiastes.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 305.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Shelley, *Leadership Weekly* (November 30, 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Francine Rivers, "His Timing is Beautiful." Christianity Today. October 12, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/october-web-only/his-timing-is-beautiful.html> (September 20, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022) 23.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *How to Inhabit Time*, 3, 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Spencer, *Awakening the Quiter Virtues* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010) 170-171.