



First United Church of Oak Park

A Time For Every Purpose

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

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The pandemic that we are living under has changed so much. Everything, really. It has even changed the way that Scripture sounds to me, how it feels to me, the images and resonances it raises with me. The book of Ecclesiastes certainly has changed for me. The tradition of our faith states that Ecclesiastes was written by wise King Solomon, wisest of all the kings, but written at the end of his life after the troubles of the world had brought him to the brink of despair.

Having lived to be full of years, Solomon had seen too much. He saw the good prosper, and the wicked prosper, too. He saw wisdom pay dividends when followed, and he saw rank folly succeed beyond all reason. Reflecting back on a whole life, the king writes:

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 reap;
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.

It is beautiful and evocative and — the more of the world I see — the more of it seems to be plainly true. The line “A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing” — that used to make no sense to me. What would be a time to refrain from embracing? And now...

Birth, death, healing, weeping, hatred, peace, silence, tearing, a great heaping up of stones — it has all gone flying past the windows of my house as I stare out from behind these four walls and wonder at the days we are living through.

Ash Wednesday last year was one of the very last services that we held in-person. And what we were doing feels so foreign now. Members lining up close behind one another, coming forward to lean in close, close enough to hear words spoken softly, just inches away, to touch one another's faces. It all seems so foreign now, like another world, somehow.

And to simply remind people of the inevitability of death — what would be the purpose? It would be like reminding everyone that it is cold outside. We're aware.

The pandemic that we are living under has changed so much. Everything, really. It has changed what mortality means to me. Now when I think of mortality, I am reminded of the great and enormous things that I felt would never change, that these things, too, are mortal. Ways of life, structures of society, whole nations — I used to believe that these things were unchanging. That I might be subject to death, but these things would live on. How wrong I was. All things change. Nothing remains the same way forever. For everything there is a season, for a time for every purpose under heaven.

All things change — even these hard times. They cannot last forever, even though it feels that way sometimes. Things will change and be different than they are now, different than how they were before, even. New: A new purpose under heaven shall have its time, a new season shall come for new things.

If I could just remember that nothing is forever! I would smear it like ash across my face if it would just remind me that nothing is forever.

For Ash Wednesday this year, we are inviting a bit of a different practice. We invite you later this evening, to write down on a piece of paper all those things that you are honestly and earnestly ready to see pass away into the past. It may be having to stay in your house all the time, or it may be you want to write down that you are ready for a fog of depression to depart and be gone forever.

Whatever it is, be sure that it is something you truly and deeply are ready to be rid of. Write those things down on a piece of paper. And then burn it. You don't

need anything special, some matches, an earthenware bowl, or a big metal mixing bowl, even a big pot would work perfectly well. And take the ashes outside and scatter them to the wind.

If you're over at Brookdale, we know that they frown upon open flames over there, so we've got a workaround. We've delivered to you some ashes from the burned palm branches from Palm Sunday 2020. Write down your list, then tear that paper up into bits, mix it in with the ashes, and when you are next able to go for a walk, scatter it to the winds.