

Changing Times

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

Well, it's daylight saving time again, time to set the clocks forward an hour and change the batteries in the smoke detectors. I remember Dennis Staer telling a joke about an old Native American who, when he heard about Daylight Saving Time, commented that only a white man could cut off a piece from the top of a blanket, sew it on the bottom of the same blanket, and imagine that somehow he had made the blanket longer! Oh well, at least it means that, according to our stomach clocks, we won't get hungry for lunch until 1pm, so that means I can preach an hour longer, right?

But seriously, in spite of the recent cold snaps, we see the undeniable evidence of Spring all around us. Our lawns are greening up, and after this cold winter, all the flowers seem to be blooming at once, much to the chagrin of all of us who suffer from hay fever. No, there's no doubt that a new season is upon us.

But our lives also have seasons, don't they? March 9, 1997 marked the beginning of a new season for me, although I didn't know it at the time. That was when I travelled down the Natchez Trace to preach my first sermon in Port Gibson. That day, we met in the Annex because the Sanctuary was being painted in preparation for Sister Donald's wedding – the beginning of a new season of life for her. Later that summer, I would move into the upstairs apartment at Redus Hall, for what I thought was just a summer job. That's when Chris Johnson asked me to stay on and help him make Christian soldiers at Chamberlain-Hunt – that was a season that lasted 17 years before it came to a close.

Yes, looking back over the last 21 years, it is easier for me to see how life has its seasons. But what are we to make of these seasons, these changes that come to all of us? Today's passage, and indeed the entire book of Ecclesiastes, points to the changing seasons of life to help us sort out what is really important.

In the first place, this passage indicates that Hedonism, devoting oneself to sensory pleasures, is futile. Oh, Solomon teaches us that pleasure is real. There is a time to laugh in life, there is a time to dance. But as the years go on, we also know that there's also a time for weeping and mourning. The Granada Ballroom is boarded up and all that's left of the AutoVue are the struts that once held up in the screen. Even in New Orleans, the good times don't roll on without interruption, as Hurricane Katrina showed us so clearly. So, does it really make sense to focus your life on things that are so fleeting?

But Solomon also teaches us in this passage that materialism, living for the acquisition of worldly goods, is just as futile as living for pleasure. There is a time to keep things, a time gather stones, but also a time to cast them away. There's a time to build up and a time to break down. No possessions, no matter how precious, last forever. The ruins of Windsor ought to tell us that. In fact the whole history of this area, the cycles of boom and bust that in the 19th Century coincided with the price of cotton, should remind us that prosperity is no more permanent than pleasure.

This came home to me in a very personal way in the summer of 2014 when my brother and I began the task of cleaning out Dad's house in Valdosta. He was more than a bit of a packrat, so there was a lot of stuff we didn't know why he had kept. Of course, neither of us could wear any of his clothes – he was my height but weighed literally twice as much. We had a lot to cast away. But he also had carefully restored and preserved some furniture that had belonged to his aunts, some of which I now have in the

Manse. It's my time to keep it, for now. But that season will also one day come to an end – after all, have you ever seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer?

But King Solomon also reminds us that if we shouldn't put our faith in our feelings or our bank accounts, we also should not put our trust in political systems or institutions. And I think we understand that. Yes, there's a time to speak, and we hung in there and tried to make a difference in the PCUSA for years. But eventually the search for health in that institution had to be abandoned, had to be replaced by a time to be silent. The time of conflict gave way to a time of peace, a new season in the EPC.

Of course, some wars involve more than just words, but even they can't permanently put an end to strife. Some of you remember the nationwide mobilization of World War II and the tremendous relief that came when Japan finally surrendered. But Eastern Europe and China were liberated, only to be immediately reoccupied by the Communists, who turned out to be just as oppressive as the Japanese and the Nazis. Years later the Soviet Empire was broken up, but now we see a resurgent Russia, annexing the Crimea, leveraging the power of its fossil fuels to enlarge its sphere of influence, especially in the Middle East.

And that's another long-term problem, isn't it? Yes, we were able to liberate Kuwait and bring down Saddam Hussein, but only to see the violence of ISIS fill the power vacuum. They too have met defeat, but now the Turks and the Kurds are squaring off. And we wonder if there will ever be a time for peace for the people who suffer from the ignorance and violence of militant Islam, which has been at war with the rest of the world for almost 1400 years. If war doesn't last forever, neither does peace.

But if we shouldn't look to pleasure or money or power for meaning in life, Solomon also warns us against focusing our lives on human relationships. For the sad truth is that love and life don't last forever, at least not in this world. There is, after all, a time to be born, and a time to die, as the last few years have brought home so vividly to my own family. And as I learned when Dad walked out on Mom before I was old enough to go to school, some of the most loving couples eventually refrain from embracing. If we pin our hopes on any other human being to keep us safe or make us happy, in one way or another, we will eventually be disappointed.

So, where does all this lead us? Many people look at the ever-changing seasons of life and settle for mere Stoicism. They shrug off life's problems, simply saying that whatever will be will be, and there's no use worrying about it. But while Stoicism can brace us against disappointment by lowering our expectations, it also prevents people from fully engaging in life, embracing its joys and trying to make a difference in this world. A fatalistic worldview is ultimately paralyzing.

Many Eastern religions embrace a similar attitude, seeing in the annual cycle of the seasons a model for human birth, life, and death. But even while they teach that people can somehow be reborn, perhaps as an animal, this endless cycle is also unsatisfying. In fact Buddha taught that the true answer to all the sufferings and problems of life wasn't just to lose interest in all material things, but to achieve nirvana, the state of ceasing to exist altogether. You don't get much more empty than that.

So, is that what Solomon is trying to teach us in this passage? That seems to be where verse 9 is leading, right? Why try, when nothing really makes a difference? Why bother working for anything?

Well, strange as it may seem to hear a preacher say this, Solomon is absolutely right – when you put his teaching in context. For the secret to understanding all this, indeed the key to understanding the

whole book of Ecclesiastes, is not found in verse 9, but in verse 1. The endless, weary cycle that these verses describe, the ever-shifting seasons of human life that yield no net profit is in fact all we can expect under heaven, in this world. In other words, a life lived under heaven, without heaven in view will in fact be a life without profit, a life without hope.

But that is precisely why we celebrate during this season of the year. We don't just rejoice that the natural cycle of the seasons begins to replace darkness with light or cold with heat. No, we celebrate the amazing fact that we don't have to go on living under Heaven. No, Heaven came crashing into our world during a particular time in history, in the life of one amazing Man. In Jesus Christ we celebrate the undeniable truth that God somehow took on human flesh, lived a perfectly sinless life, died a cruel death on a cross, and rose from the dead on the third day. We celebrate that Christ did all of this to break the cycle of sin and death, and to make it possible for Heaven and Earth to be reunited, so that all who trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord would not have to go on living under heaven, but be able to live forever with Him.

In other words, in Jesus Christ we celebrate the end of the seemingly endless cycle, but not with the acquisition of Nirvana, the idea of ceasing to be. No, when Christ comes again there won't be a time to die anymore. There will be no more mourning or sorrow or crying or war. For when He comes again, the Prince of Peace will bring peace not only between God and Man, but between all of us forever.

But while the Lord tarries, how can all of that make a difference in our lives today? Knowing that Jesus has come to break the cycle of sin and death of course gives us a reason to turn away from sin in our personal lives. Of course the great love Jesus has shown to us on the cross gives us a powerful motivation to seek His face in prayer and to learn His will in Scripture. But knowing that this world is actually moving toward a grand conclusion, knowing that Christ really has the power to change things has also given Christians a reason to work hard to improve the world around us. And since the resurrection of Christ, the followers of Jesus have rejected the fatalistic outlook of Stoicism, choosing instead to make a positive difference in every part of life.

Here are just a few examples. It was Christians who first took a stand for life in Ancient Rome by saving babies who had been thrown out on trash heaps, abandoned by their parents. Once Christianity became legal, it was Christians who invented the institution of the hospital, starting one in every town where there was a cathedral. Years later, Christians like John Wycliffe and Martin Luther insisted that the Scriptures be translated into languages people could actually understand, and this formed the basis of literacy throughout the Western World. This has certainly been true in America, as Christians have been responsible for starting the vast majority of all the schools and colleges, primarily so that people could learn to read the Bible for themselves. It was Christians who introduced to the Ancient world the idea that men and women are inherently equal. In our own community, there were not one, but two schools started specifically for girls, one by the Methodists, and one in our own Annex by the Presbyterians. And today Christians still stand up for the rights of the least of these, for the unborn to have a chance at life, and for children to have the opportunity to grow up in the most healthy way, in an intact family with a father and mother who are married to each other.

No, working for meaningful change hasn't always been easy or safe. But the followers of Jesus have always tried to make a difference because Jesus made the greatest difference of all, not only in our own lives, but throughout all of human history. By bringing Heaven to Earth, He has made it possible for all

who trust in Him to break out of the meaningless cycles of this world, and instead to strive for higher ground and to experience the permanent joys of heaven here, today.