

The Wisdom of Time  
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15  
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“Tell me: what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” This question – posed by Mary Oliver in her poem, “The Summer Day” – opened our series on Wisdom this summer. “Tell me: what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Since then, we’ve explored what wisdom means to *us* – not hypothetically, but personally, right here, right now. And we’ve dived in to Scripture for some answers. Today we close our series on Wisdom.

Next Sunday we kick off our new series: “Our Bible, Our Selves: 40 Stories to Remind Us Who (and Whose) We Are.” In response to *your* desire to be better equipped with Scripture, we’ll start with Genesis 1, connecting Bible stories with questions from our lives. I’m excited. Best of all, throughout the school year, everyone from preschool to old age will be on the same page in worship and Sunday school - families can go home talking about the same stories.

But today, it’s time to wrap up our series on Wisdom. And I can think of no better words than those written by the sage behind the book of Ecclesiastes. Listen for the Word of God:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

<sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

<sup>9</sup> What gain have the workers from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything suitable for its

time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

<sup>12</sup>I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup>moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

<sup>14</sup>I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. <sup>15</sup>That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

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Summer's almost over ... September is just days away ... and School is starting. Our youngest kids are stepping into preschool for the first time, and our graduating seniors? They're moving into a new dorm somewhere, in a new town, getting to know their new roommate, finding new friends ... leaving their parents behind, bittersweet, filled with pride and disorientating sorrow. Where did the time go?

No matter how old we are, we're caught by surprise at the swift changes time brings. It is the nature of the human ego: you prepare your best; you think you know what's going to happen; then gasp at your inability to control how a new season unfolds. I can't help recalling again the story Garrison Keillor tells of changing seasons up north in Lake Wobegon:

“A hard frost hits in September, and kills the tomatoes that we, being frugal, protected with straw and paper tents, which we, being sick of tomatoes, left some holes in. ...

One Saturday in October, Clint put up his storm windows, and the next Saturday everyone did, including Byron and his boy Johnny, who asks, “Why do we have to do it today just because everyone else is?” ...

“It was chilly the next night, and the night after that. ... A big storm blew in on a Wednesday, a storm nobody saw coming, not even Bud who knows weather like my father knows the [train schedule] and calls the storms as they roll in from the Coast.

“Freezing rain fell in the morning, turning to heavy snow, and by suppertime we had thirteen inches on the ground and more coming, falling sideways in front of a stiff west wind, and you couldn’t see the house across the street... This [storm] caught Bud leaning toward autumn.”<sup>i</sup>

Seasons. We know the change is coming, yet somehow, we’re always surprised.

“To everything there is a season,” says Ecclesiastes, “and a time to every purpose under heaven.” As surely as the seasons of the year will change, so do the changing seasons of our lives.

I was keenly aware of it this summer – first, with my twin sister Karen in Ohio, as I spent three weeks with her, driving her to cancer treatments, doing what little else I could, including preaching in the church she pastors in Granville. And in this season of her illness, I couldn’t help but think of all we’ve been through together – from early childhood, babbling twin-talk in our cribs, through schoolwork and boyfriends, seminary and ordination, marriage and children, and all the churches each one of us has served. Where did the time go? How did we get to this season?

And I’ve been aware of the changing seasons in my own home. Last week, John and Annie and I spent time in Oregon, where we lived twenty years ago. Every year we go back to visit our friends there, to climb by Multnomah Falls, spend time at Powell’s bookstore, and then head to the coast in Lincoln City. As I gazed out from our balcony to the view I always cherish – the wide, sandy beach, crashing waves on the shore, the endless horizon where water meets sky - memories kept popping up, unbidden: Annie and I riding horses on the beach last year ... Annie and John flying kites when she was ten ... Annie years earlier, as a tiny toddler learning to walk, wobbling in the sand, plopping down on her sweet little butt and grabbing our knees to get up again. How on earth did my precious child get to be 24 years old? Where did the time go? How on earth did we get to this season?

Every fall – with the start of school, and as the leaves begin to turn – I cannot help but noticing: another year has come and gone, bringing changes both welcome and sad. As this summer season closes now for you, I wonder what you’ve noticed. Reflect for just a minute on your own household: what changes you’ve seen,

welcome or not ... what seasons of life are over now for you or those you love ... what memories you want to cherish, and what challenges you're glad are behind you. It's so rare that we take time to pause, to notice how much has changed, to savor memories and wonder at the future yet to come.

And then there's the church's life. It was such a privilege to preside two weeks ago at Jill Hunt's retirement as our organist and music director. But I confess I was shocked to realize that in Jill's twenty wonderful years, she worked with no less than six pastors and interim pastors. It's not hard to do the math: since I've been here ten years, her first ten years were spent with five different heads of staff.<sup>ii</sup> Yikes, that's a lot of change. It's no wonder y'all are so kind to celebrate my ten years of ministry with you. It's the longest run you've had in quite a while!

"To everything there is a season," says Ecclesiastes, "and a time to every purpose under heaven." And I cannot help but wonder: where did the time go here? How did we get to this season?

As I've prepared for today, I've been reminiscing about what it was like ten years ago when I arrived. It was 2005, just a few years after 9/11 ... our country was well into the Iraq War ... and Hurricane Katrina had just decimated New Orleans. In my household, John was working in LaGrange – an easy commute where we lived in Clarendon Hills – and Annie was going into her sophomore year of high school. It was absurd to think about moving. To make matters worse, I remember talking with colleagues in the Presbytery about this call and many saying, "Why on earth would you go to Lake Forest? They chew up pastors and spit them out."

It made me wonder how you remembered that time too. Take a minute and think back. How do you remember our world then? Your household's life? And if you were here, how do you remember our church's time then?

I asked a few folks in the congregation. One member said, "We were in a tough spot. ... The congregation was concerned – but ready to move forward in a positive direction." Another said, "Our church was in flux after a significant change in the senior pastoral staff. The remaining staff wasn't functioning well as a team. Mission was carried out in multiple silos. Many families weren't fully committed ... others departed for local area churches. Our congregation was

seeking stability and direction.” Still another said, “We were hopeful ... but perhaps a bit nervous about the transition.”

Hope and nervousness. Doesn't that describe our approach to most changing seasons in our lives?

Over the last ten years, we've been through a lot together. A few years into my ministry, the stock market and housing market crash took the wind out of our nation. We've seen two Presidential elections, and increasing bifurcation across America's political and economic life. Our denomination approved gay ordination and then same-sex marriage, to some members' delight, and others' consternation. Across the world, the Arab Spring rose up and drifted away, leaving in its wake the terror of ISIS in far too many places. And in our daily lives, we've seen continued increase in technology, so subtle we don't even notice its impact: now cell phones, on-line shopping, Skype and FaceTime are just part of our routine.

And there's been plenty of change in our own community. We've seen turn-over in staff: new leadership for mission and deacons, for adult education, for organist and choirs, for communications, for the business office. We said good-bye to beloved colleagues like Gordon Butcher and Kristie Finley. We studied best practices and chose to move from director-level children and youth leaders to pastors, as had sometimes been the case in earlier years. I think it's fair to say we had a rough go with transitions in youth leadership, which is in a very good place again now. Through the generous donations of particular members, we added staff to reach out to Lake Forest College. We also invested in our “campus” – the house next door that you purchased before I arrived – 750 N. Sheridan – ended up as a manse, the garage rebuilt, part of the backyard turned into an open space, and funds were raised to draw down the debt. Rummage has changed: no longer under the auspices of Presbyterian Women, it's shifted to mission committee's oversight. And speaking of mission, we've radically reduced the number of agencies we support, so that we're focusing our efforts on a solid core. We added our first@five service, too – drawing people to a casual, intimate, come-as-you are worship service with fellowship at supper. And then there was the Sesquicentennial celebration: our 150 year anniversary, complete with special events, guest preachers, a parade float, tee-shirts, a commissioned song, and of course, the colossally over-written coffee-table book. At least the pictures are great.

As you think of our ten years together, what other memories come to mind? I also asked some members to think about what's different now – what's changed in the last ten years. A couple said that we're much friendlier now, more welcoming. One said she'd noticed that it used to be that committees argued with each other all the time, and didn't trust each other, and it doesn't seem to be that way anymore. Another pointed out that our staff seem to get along with each other – I think that's true, and it's not accidental. And, like Jim Kingsley pointed out last Sunday in worship, we have a clear mission: to send inspired, well-equipped followers of Jesus into the world – compassionate, generous, resilient and wise.

But looking backwards ... that isn't all there is to do now, is it? I'm struck by the opportunity we have as we mark ten years, and start our 11<sup>th</sup> fall together. It is a new season, with its own challenges and opportunities, its own surprises and enormous blessings. And I wonder: what does it look like for us to live wisely in this season, now?

Let me frame it this way: a couple of months ago, I consulted for a church in transition in New England. It's not very different than ours: it's in a well-to-do suburban community, with lots of finance and business leaders, a fair number of retirees, a mix of long-timers and newcomers. They are looking for a pastor to lead them in this new season. I know their interim pastor and their associate pastor well.

As I talked with them, it dawned on me that I was looking at them with fresh eyes, just like I did when I came here ten years ago. And it made me ask myself: if you were looking for a new pastor today – which you're not, but if you were – what would you say about our church? What would your elevator speech be about who we are? What would you say we most need right now?

In other words: what does it look like for us to live wisely, faithfully, in *this* season, now?

The changing of life's seasons is not easy. No matter how old we are, we're caught by surprise at the swift changes time brings. It is the nature of our human ego: we prepare our best; we think we know what's going to happen; then gasp at our inability to control how a new season unfolds. And even in that, there is a blessing – a rich and unexpected blessing: once we grasp that we aren't in control,

we open our hands and wonder at the gifts God has in store for us. And we wait to see what God provides for this most blessed season.

What season is it for you? It's the end of summer now. The leaves are still lush, the humidity thick –the school year is starting up again, and soon enough the fall will come. Soon we'll have cold nights again, and a hard frost, and soon, winter again on its heels. But until then, let us enjoy the season that we have.

Writer Frederick Buechner put it this way:

“‘This is the day which the Lord has made,’ says the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm. ‘Let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ Or weep and be sad in it for that matter. The point is to see (this season) for what it is because it will be gone before you now it. If you waste it, it is your life that you’re wasting.”<sup>iii</sup>

And if you live in it, lean into it, whatever season this may be, you will find God’s joy and purpose for however long this season lasts.

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to reap. A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away. ...

“For God has made everything suitable, suitable in its own time.” Amen.

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<sup>i</sup>Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (NY: Viking, 1985), pp. 188-9 and 203-4.

<sup>ii</sup>Terry Swicegood, Ken Hindman (interim), Art Webster, Jim Brasel (interim) and Don Dempsey (interim).

<sup>iii</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988, 1993), pp. 117-8.