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Ecclesiastes 3:1-22
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A Season for Everything

There is a chill in the air. The leaves are beginning to rustle. The sun is setting a little earlier. And the birds are singing that unmistakable song that says, "Summer is over, buddy."

As a kid, I used to lament the end of summer.

Late nights. Playing outside way past dark. Barefoot. Long days at the pool with friends. Sleeping in. All the good things in life. Fall meant the arrival of school and the death of childhood.

As an adult, however, I've come to welcome fall. Because I've been around the block enough to know that just as one season passes, another arrives. And eventually spring comes bursting back into summer, and the good life returns.

Seasons. I love seasons.

And if anyone should ever question the existence of God, I think they ought to spend some time pondering the rhythmic cycles built into creation.

Things are born. Things die. And things are born again. Over and over and over again.

The wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes understood this pattern. As he—or perhaps she—contemplated the meaning of life, they recognized that life itself is made up of seasons.

Scholars aren't entirely sure who wrote Ecclesiastes or exactly when it was written. Some have traditionally attributed it to Solomon, King David's son, who was supposedly one of the wisest people who ever lived. Although, judging from some of the things Solomon did, I sometimes wonder about that claim.

But whoever wrote Ecclesiastes understood something profoundly important about life:We do not get to stay in one season forever.

The passage we are focusing on today, Ecclesiastes 3, is probably best heard in song. And fortunately, our choir has already helped us with that. It is also the passage that inspired the 1960s rock band The Byrds to sing:

"There is a season…" "Turn, turn, turn." "A time to be born, a time to die." "A time to love, a time to hate." "A time for war, a time for peace." And how does the song end?

"I swear it's not too late." That was an important message during the Vietnam War era. The hope was that the season of war would eventually come to an end and the season of peace would begin. We hope that for today!

Over the next couple of months, we are going to turn from the Book of Acts—putting the finale on pause until later—and turn instead to the different seasons mentioned in this passage. Each week we will focus on one of these dialectics, these pairs of seemingly opposite seasons, and consider how God is present in both.

So turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, as we listen for the Word of the Lord.

3 For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:
2 a time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;
3 a time to kill and a time to heal;
a time to break down and a time to build up;
4 a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance;
5 a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
6 a time to seek and a time to lose;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;
7 a time to tear and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent and a time to speak;
8 a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.

9 What gain have the workers from their toil? **10** I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. **11** 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. **12** I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; **13** moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. **14** 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. **15** That which is already has been, that which is to be already is, and God seeks out what has gone by.

16 Moreover, I saw under the sun that, in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. **17** I said to myself, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter and for every work." **18** I said to myself with regard to humans that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. **19** For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all

have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals, for all is vanity. **20** All go to one place, all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. **21** Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? **22** So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination

One of the things I appreciate about Ecclesiastes is that it refuses to make life too simple. We Christians sometimes have a tendency to reduce everything to black and white. Right and wrong. Good and bad. Us and them. Faithful and unfaithful.

And yet Ecclesiastes comes along and says: "Not so fast." What if faith is sometimes lived in the gray? What if God is much bigger than our ability to understand God? What if life is filled with tensions and contradictions that we simply cannot resolve?

Solomon—or whoever wrote Ecclesiastes—gives us an entire list of them. Being born and dying. Planting and uprooting. Killing and healing. Tearing down and building up. Weeping and laughing. Mourning and dancing. Keeping silent and speaking. Loving and hating. War and peace.

It's almost as though God is saying, "Folks, I am in all of life. Not just in the parts you understand. Not just in the seasons you enjoy. Not just in the little group of people who think, believe, and act like you do." Imagine what might happen in our country—and in our world—if we actually believed that. Maybe we'd discover that we have far more in common with people we disagree with than we have differences.

Because life is complicated. And faith is complicated. And God is certainly bigger than our little boxes.

Today, we begin with one of the biggest tensions of all: A time to be born and a time to die.

One of the great privileges of being a pastor is that I get to be present with people at some of the most important moments of their lives. Sometimes I get to be there at the beginning. Sometimes I get to be there at the end. And what I have discovered is that these two seemingly opposite moments—birth and death—actually have a surprising amount in common.

There is anticipation. There is fear of the unknown. There is uncertainty. There can be pain and suffering. There is delivery. There is relief. There can be peace. There can be joy.

Whether you're giving birth to a baby or, in some sense, giving birth to a soul into its next existence, there is a lot we don't control. And anyone who has ever been in a delivery room knows exactly what I mean. We can make a birth plan. We can laminate it. We can put it in a three-ring binder. And then the baby says, "That's adorable."

I vividly remember the births of each of our four children. Not one of them happened exactly according to our plan. Our first, Maddy, came much faster than expected. So the birthing plan went out the window almost immediately. Our second, Rhyan, was an emergency C-section because he was breech. Again—the birthing plan went out the window. Our third, Jordan, was scheduled for a C-section because she was breech. But then she decided to flip at the last moment, turning what was supposed to be a C-section into a natural birth with drugs. Our fourth, Sofia, was delivered with a midwife who pushed Karen right to the brink before finally giving her the epidural.

By that point, we had learned something important: We were not driving the bus. We had taken the classes. We had read the books. We knew the terminology. We had the plans. But when it came down to it, we had to trust the doctors, the nurses, and most importantly, God.

And despite all the chaos of those delivery rooms, I will always cherish those first couple of hours after each birth. There was this incredible peace. This calm. And this instantaneous love for this little human being we had just met. The Lord was very near.

Scripture has a lot to say about the mystery of birth. Psalm 139 says: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb."[1]

I love that image. God knitting us together. If you've ever watched someone knit, you may picture some older, very patient person sitting in a chair, furiously working on a sweater that absolutely has to be finished by Christmas.

But the Hebrew is actually a little more complicated. The literal language talks about God possessing our kidneys and covering us in the womb. Now, that doesn't make quite as nice a Hallmark card. But in the ancient world, the kidneys were understood as the seat of our deepest emotions, thoughts, and feelings. In other words, the things that make us uniquely us.

The psalmist is saying that God knows us at our deepest level. God knows us before we know ourselves. The psalmist continues: "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place." "Your eyes saw my unformed body."

Think about that. Before anyone else knew who we would become, God knew us. Before our parents knew our name, God knew our name. Before we had

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[1] Psalm 139:13

accomplished anything, God already knew our worth. And Jeremiah hears God say something similar:"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart."[2]

That's mind-boggling. We spend so much of our lives trying to figure out who we are. What is my purpose? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? And Scripture reminds us that our identity doesn't begin with what we accomplish. It begins with the fact that God knows us and loves us.

But Scripture doesn't only talk about physical birth. Jesus talks about another kind of birth. In John 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. And Jesus tells him, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." Nicodemus immediately takes Jesus literally. "How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb!"[3] And I love Nicodemus because I think many of us would have reacted exactly the same way. "Jesus, I'm pretty sure that's medically impossible."

But Jesus wasn't talking about physical birth. He was talking about spiritual birth. "Flesh gives birth to flesh," Jesus says, "but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." There is more than one way to be born. There is the moment we enter this physical world. And there are moments throughout our lives when God gives birth to something new within us.

A new calling. A new faith. A new understanding. A new relationship with God. A new season.

Sometimes we think our life is over because something has ended. But God may simply be beginning something new. Because there is a season for everything under heaven.

And then comes the other side of the equation. "A time to die." We don't like talking about death. Especially in our culture. We do almost everything we can to avoid it. We exercise. We eat healthy. We take our vitamins. We see our doctors. We count our steps. We drink green smoothies.

And then one day God says, "Congratulations. You've walked 10,000 steps. Now you're done." The truth is that death comes for all of us. Ecclesiastes says: "All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all return to dust." That is the hard truth.

Spoiler alert: We are all going to die. None of us gets out of this alive.

And yet the Christian faith says something remarkably different about death. Death is real. Death hurts. Death physically separates us from people we love.

But death is not the end of the story.

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[2] Jeremiah 1:4-5

[3] John 3:1-8

There is a beautiful tradition that says the very act of breathing can be understood as an act of prayer. We breathe in. Yah. We breathe out. Weh. Yah-weh. Yah-weh. The very name of God. With our first breath, we receive life. And with our final breath, we release it. Every breath is an act of praise. And through every breath in between, God is present.

That is what makes death so mysterious. We don't know everything about what happens on the other side. And Ecclesiastes certainly doesn't pretend that we do. In fact, the writer asks,"Who knows?" That's an important question.

Sometimes faith means being willing to say, "I don't know." We don't have to pretend that we have every answer. But we Christians do have a hope. And that hope is Jesus Christ.

Jesus told the thief dying beside him on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise."[4]

Paul tells us that death does not have the final word. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."[5]

And Paul declares: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."[6]

That changes everything.

There is an old story about a priest who believed he was dying in the hospital. He asked a local banker and a local politician to come and stand beside his bed.

The two men were deeply touched.

They held his hands.

Finally, the politician asked, "Father, why did you want us here at the end?"

The priest whispered, "Jesus died between two thieves. I want to go the same way."

There are probably worse ways to spend our final moments.

But here is the thing: We don't have to be afraid of death because Jesus has already gone there before us. Psalm 23 says that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Notice the psalm doesn't say we stop in the valley. It says we walk through it. Through the valley.

And on the other side is a table. A banquet table. A place where goodness and mercy follow us. A place where the psalmist says, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."[7]

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[4] Luke 23:43

[5] Romans 6:23

[6] 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

[7] Psalm 23:6

And Revelation gives us the final image: God will wipe every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death. No more mourning. No more crying. No more pain. Because the old order of things has passed away.[8]

This is why Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep and drive like those who have no hope."[9] Because of Jesus Christ we have have hope even in the face of death.

So today we begin our journey through the seasons of life. There is indeed a time to be born. And there is a time to die. There is a time to begin. And there is a time to end.

There are seasons when God seems incredibly close. And seasons when God seems strangely silent.

There are seasons of joy. And seasons of grief.

Seasons when we understand. And seasons when all we can say is, "God, I have absolutely no idea what you're doing."

And maybe that's one of the great lessons of Ecclesiastes. We don't control the seasons. We don't get to decide when one begins. We don't get to decide when one ends. We can make plans. We can make lists. We can put those lists in a pretty binder. But ultimately, we are not driving the bus.

God is.

And perhaps the invitation to us today is not to control every season but to trust God in every season. Because the same God who is present at our first breath is present at our last. The same God who knit us together in our mother's womb will hold us when we return to dust. The same Jesus who meets us in the joy of birth will meet us in the valley of death. And the same Spirit who gives us new life will carry us into whatever comes next.

Ecclesiastes says: "God has made everything suitable for its time." Or, as another translation puts it: "He has made everything beautiful in its time."[10]

So wherever we find ourself today—whatever season we're in—let's remember this:

It is only a season. It will not last forever. And God is in it.

So let us trust the God who makes all things beautiful in their time. And let us turn, turn, turn—knowing that through every season, God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are with us. Amen.

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[8] Revelation 21:4

[9] 1 Thessalonians 4:13

[10] Ecclesiastes 3:11