

God's Time

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Galatians 4:4-7

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we're standing on the hinge day of the year—the day in which 2017 swings closed and 2018 opens.

For many of us this time of the year invites reflection. Every time my mother takes down her Christmas tree she thinks about what life was like last year at this time and she wonders what life may bring before she hangs up lights and ornaments again. What births will come? What deaths will have taken place? Who will gather for Christmas a year hence? It is a time when we take a deep breath and wonder about the content and quality of our lives.

This time last year, I didn't make any New Year's resolutions. But I did buy a new planner. I was looking for a tool to help me make time for things that were important without neglecting daily tasks.

Now this wasn't just a pocket organizer or a wall calendar. This was a 300-page monster planner complete with every category under the sun. There were pages for monthly planning. Pages for weekly planning. Places to keep track of monthly household tasks and grocery lists. Pages for prayer requests. Places to assess what went well or not so well in the past week. Truly, there was a place for "every activity under the heavens."

I showed my new purchase to a couple of good friends with great enthusiasm. "See," I said, "It even has a place to keep track of how much water I drank today." They looked at each other, and then at me. "Well, you'll have to let us know how it works for you," one of them said.

Undaunted, I launched into the work of planning. And for a while that planner worked pretty well. What's for dinner next Monday? Check the planner. What work responsibilities need attending this week? Check the planner. May our son go to a birthday party? Check the planner.

Soon, though, my optimism about this particular tool wore off. The thing was heavy, physically. It was hard to carry around. And there were scheduling choices that came up when I was out and the planner was at home, sitting there uselessly on the kitchen counter.

And then, to no one's astonishment but mine, something unexpected would happen. We would wake up with a sick child. A washing machine would stop draining. The car blew a radiator hose on the way home from church.

My inability to work my own system pointed out an idol of my heart. My unarticulated assumption was, "If I can manage my time, I will be able to manage the things that feel unmanageable in my life." The unexpected, mundane bumps in the road revealed my flawed expectations for this system. Could it help me manage time? Yes. Could it make me a master of time? No.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes can sniff out that idol a mile away. It's called the idol of Time-Mastery, and it creeps in under the guise of living a wise and productive life.

We can pull up a chair in the Teacher's classroom, most likely several hundred years before the time of Jesus. The Teacher wants to shake the people up. He's seen it all and done it all. And he has some news for the bright upstarts he is teaching. They're not as smart as they think they are. Their lives are shorter than they think. And all their learning is 'hevel'—empty, vanity. (Such nay-saying may not be recommended as a first-line strategy if you are an elementary school teacher.)

Like John the Baptist, the Teacher is sweeping things clean. He is "preparing the way for the Lord," calling out the spiritual bankruptcy of wisdom separated from the God who is its source.

Within our passage this morning is a well-known poem about time. "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens," he begins.

- ² a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- ³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,

The Teacher catalogues the plethora of times and experiences that make up life. Some are inherently joyful: healing that revives bodies and spirits; shared laughter so plentiful your stomach aches, elated dancing without self-consciousness.

Other times are difficult or painful: weeping at the death of a friend, mourning that hangs on forever, death that robs dignity and dishes out pain.

Some of the Teacher's times include human participation in shaping. Other times are unexpected and unmanageable. Such, the Teacher says, is life under the heavens. A time for birthday candles and a time for coffins. A time for Kleenex and comfort foods, and a time for comedies and the cha-cha slide. A time to rejoice in what is, and a time to wish.... Well, to wish that things were different.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's classic *The Lord of the Rings*, a backcountry Hobbit named Frodo is tasked with a quest beyond his ability. He must destroy a powerful evil ring in enemy territory. The journey takes him running for his life through strange lands with stranger monsters, battling evil forces in his mind, witnessing the premature deaths of friends who saved him. In an honest moment, Frodo says: "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." His companion, the wizard Gandalf, responds: "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil." Gandalf is right—at least partly. Evil is not the only, or even the most powerful, actor in life under the heavens.

The Teacher would agree.

In one of the few references to God in Ecclesiastes, the Teacher says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. 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.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11, 12-13).

The God who created the world and ordered it with a word holds our times. The regular, predictable rhythm of the Teacher’s poem offers a kind of counterbalance to the dizzying array of times in life under the sun.

A time for this. Tick.

A time for that. Tock.

A time for that. Tick.

And a time for this. Tock.

And all of these times? Every last one of them belongs to God. “The times I’m describing are all over the map,” the Teacher says, “they may disorient you and distress you. But they cannot dismantle you. I’m singing an old, old song—one that began at the beginning, when good order came from chaos. The tune is familiar and the words are true. There is a time for every activity under the heavens.” And the idol of Time Mastery comes crashing down before the Master Weaver of all our Times.

It’s all God’s Time. And just beyond our vision, God is crafting something unimaginably beautiful out of it. He picks up rough, black, splintery threads. He weaves in fluffy yellows and satiny lime greens. Purples and midnight blues. And in some mysterious way, God weaves them into a thing of beauty.

Between here and forever, though, we do have choices to make. How will we weave with the times we are given?

The Teacher has some ideas. There is homework in this class. The homework isn’t complicated, but it requires repetition. His recommendation? **Enjoy** the good gifts of God under the sun.

“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.”

When was the last time we thought about things that made us happy or engaged an activity that brought us joy? When was the last time we ate in an unhurried, undistracted way, finding joy in God’s gift of a meal that delights our taste buds and nourishes our bodies? When was the last time we engaged deep work—when we became so absorbed in creativity that when we were done, our souls breathed, “Amen, it is good.”

At the start of a new year, what small shifts might bring us nearer to enjoying what we eat and drink, and the work that we do? The times of enjoyment are God’s gifts. Let’s not let them pass by.

What assurance do we have, today, that the Teacher is right? How do we know that God is indeed making everything beautiful in his time?

Into the fabric of history God interweaves one thread that changes the entire pattern. Within those dark blacks, deep purples, flashes of yellow, God weaves the radiant face of his Son. “When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under

the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to son-ship.” In Jesus, all our times hold together.

Paul goes on to say this: “⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”

God has a future filled with hope—filled with him--in store. We know because he sent Jesus. And because he sent his Spirit. Jesus’ entrance into history and his presence with us now assures that our times today are not meaningless, not unprofitable.

The God who owns our times doesn’t just *say* he loves us. He *backs it up* with the costliest love we can imagine, loves us enough to send his only Son into time, weaving time into his purposes. We are not slaves to demanding seasons of life. We are not slaves to overfull planners. We are not even slaves to our own impossible expectations. We are children of God.

So when we have decisions to make about how to use the times and seasons we’ve been given, we don’t make decisions in fear. We don’t make them under compulsion. The good news means that we make life decisions already having received God’s greatest gift: Jesus. We are free to make decisions as *children* whose inheritance is to be with the Father who holds us at all times.