

August 16, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 17 Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Dearly Beloved;

Time flies when you are having fun! Also when the times are interesting. We are living in interesting times, Covid-19 times. We have been reminded that life is fragile, and that time is limited when it comes to human experience. And all of this from a virus we cannot see with the naked eye, and a plague for which we do not have a blue pill, or a serum with which to vaccinate people and make them immune.

As society “opens up” we are tempted to think that activity means a return to normal. That is not the case. As Dr. Tam has reminded us this past week, we are tempted to think we do not have to be as careful as we were in the days of March and April when the daily figures of infected patients were ballooning, and in which we were really made fearful by the statistic concerning deaths. We came to realize we were very vulnerable. And then vulnerability became the “new normal.” And now there is the temptation to simply believe that what is going to happen is going to happen, and we are powerless to alter our fate.

If you know anything about me, you know I do not use words carelessly. We are tempted to think there is nothing we can do to change the path of this plague, or to prevent our becoming infected. Not so, dear friends. Not so! The ancients understood better than we the effectiveness of social distancing. To this we have offered the modern insights of washing our hands regularly (counting to 20 helps too). Using hand sanitizer further boosts the margin of personal

safety. Wearing a mask, or face covering to prevent the droplets from our own breath from reaching others, and to a degree preventing the droplets from the breath of others entering our own bodies. The science (lessons learned since March by those who study viruses and particularly this, Covid-19 virus) has learned many lessons. We know more than we did back in March. We also know that we must not get careless.

Barbara and I are well. I spend a lot of time listening to the experts about how to do life, and meet in groups, most safely in preparation for a time when we will gather to worship once again. This epistle is about preparing for that time. We must keep on, keeping on, in the routine of disinfecting, masking and social distancing. When we announce that services are beginning, it will be imperative that we all follow the rules. We will need to remember that the rules are not made by the church or even the Session, and certainly not by the minister. The privilege of gathering, comes under the oversight of our Ontario government, and the rules are from Public Health.

Dr. Williams was asked if it is safe for children to go back to school. His answer was, (I am not quoting him verbatim) it is as safe as it is going to be, given that we have no vaccine at this time. The numbers are indicating that in many areas of the province there appears to be minimal danger. The experts anticipate that a second wave will hit as the cold and flu season arrives...mid to late Fall. Again, this is not the time to get careless. Distancing, washing hands and masking are a

minimal means to safe assembly. That said, let us turn to the Scriptures.

I suspect most of us remember the Byrds (a folk group) who sounded like a soft rock band, singing the words of Ecclesiastes 3. In “Where Have All The Flowers Gone” (a musical autobiography of Pete Seeger), he wrote the following regarding Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and the Byrds recording of “Turn, Turn, Turn.” “Funny story about how the next song (Turn, Turn, Turn) came to be put together. About 1959 I got a letter from my publisher complaining, “Pete, can’t you write another song like ‘Good Night Irene’? I can’t sell or promote these protest songs.” (Pete writes) I tore off an angry note to him, “You better find yourself another song writer. These are the only kind of song I know how to write.” I leafed through my pocket notebook to some verses I’d copied down a year before, verses by a bearded fellow with sandals, a tough minded fellow called Ecclesiastes who lived in Judea, like 3000 years ago. I added one line (“a time of peace, I swear it’s not too late”), omitted a few lines, and repeated the first two lines as a chorus, plus one new word repeated three times. Taped it. Mailed it out the next morning.

Got a letter from the publisher two days later. “Wonderful; just what I hoped for.” Myself, I was delighted by the version of the Byrds: all those electric guitars like clanging bells.” That is the story of how Pete Seeger came to write a pop song, using the words of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 for the balance of the lyric. (P. 173 “Where Have All The Flowers Gone” a musical autobiography of Pete Seeger)

The Byrds success story with Pete's rendering of this Bible passage makes a real point. It was the Byrds greatest hit. And the point is, we have here a portion of Scripture which resonates with the human soul, and speaks to the human psyche. "To everything," (Pete added, turn, turn, turn) "there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven." And guess what? Pete used the text as its found in the King James Version of the Bible, I have no doubt because of its poetic quality.

"A time to be born, a time to die." It is sensible not to argue with that concept. Next to Christmas and Easter, my birthday is my favourite day of the year. And it is not because of the whole idea of receiving gifts. That is a nice gesture, but it is also most meaningful when three people in my life do it. Barbara, my son Matthew, my daughter Rebekah. It's not about the movies, the books, the tools, and so on. One of my favourite gifts was a scarf my daughter knitted for me. It is about 7 feet long. One of those rare scarves that you can wrap around your neck and still have it hang down close to your knees. As I said, it's not about the gifts. It is about the fact that these people who are the heart of my universe, remember that that day is the anniversary of my arrival, squealing and kicking, into this world. My beginning day.

A visit to any cemetery will convince you that universally accepted important information about anybody, is the day their life began, and the day life among us, with us,

came to an end. Some have remarked that the most important piece of information on every one of us is the dash between the two dates, the time that was filled with all the parts, activities and afternoon naps, that make up a life time.

I know of a young man who is autistic, and loves to visit cemeteries. He researches where historic figures are buried. He likes to go and visit and see and even photograph the headstones that have the vital information on them. It is part of the key insight that “to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.”

Every gardener knows the truth of the next two lines. There is “a time to plant and a time to uproot.” We sow seeds in order to have to food to eat. Some of us take particular pleasure in the fact that we can augment the choice of vegetables that we could buy at the grocery store with stuff from the garden. I get a kick out of the taste of a tomato that went from the vine in the garden box, to the table in a matter of minutes. A neighbour this past week mentioned how much she enjoyed a feed or two of green beans that we harvested and shared. They were crisp. They were of superior taste. And they were fresh.

When the harvest is done and gone, it is time to uproot what is left in the garden. The whole weeding process is a matter of being able to judge when the plants you are laboring to bring to maturity are big enough and strong enough that weeds can be removed without

disturbing the good stuff. And as one of the parables of Jesus advises, sometimes you have to wait until after the harvest unless you are willing to pay the price of losing the wheat with the unwanted weeds. There is a right time to plant. We know. We have seen the result when we misjudged the time or when we got over-eager and lost tender shoots to a late frost. There is a time which is right for planting and uprooting. And you have to be careful about it.

There is “a time to kill and a time to heal.” We have lived full lives most of us. And the truth is there was not a year that went by when somewhere on this dear old planet there were not people’s at war with one another. You can try to talk about reasons that these continuous wars went on. The fact is they did. And in a time of war combatants face a stark reality. Kill or be killed. There are times when people cannot avoid the fact that they have to make such choices. No one in their right mind would choose to live in a time when the choices are so limited...but there are such times, such circumstances.

On the other hand there are times when tremendous healing takes place. I have seen documentaries of World War II vets from both sides, laying wreaths in memory of friends and fellow soldiers who were killed in the flower of youth...who in spite of it all have become friends, good friends, dear friends. And we have known so many who have been deathly ill, with cancer and the like who have managed to arrive at a time of healing. I am in the midst of a year I find

remarkable. I have had more strength, been able to do more stuff that I could not do for the past four years. I presume that sufficient healing has taken place that I can walk, and split wood, and sleep through the night. A time to heal and to recognize that healing has taken place, praise God.

Ecclesiastes is a book in the Biblical Library which belongs to the category of Wisdom Literature. It is not History. It is not prophecy. It is filled with wisdom that can be applied to real life situations and circumstances. A major theme of this book, as a whole is that under God's grace and in the midst of HIS sovereignty, things happen at the right time. Here is a profound and terrifying insight. Covid-19, this plague of 2020, happened at the right time. "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." We are tempted to cry out about the injustice of the disruption to our our lives, the loss of money, the loss of work and of business, to say nothing about the loss of life world wide. Faith in Jesus does not reduce us to fatalism. It does call us to change what we can and to accept things we cannot change. To make the best of sour situations.

I will never read stories in the Bible that involve lepers and leprosy in the same way that I used to. They provide a reminder of how people coped with incurable illnesses that could be passed from person to person, before we understood about germs, bacteria and viruses and before we had modern medicines. It has also reminded us how precious it is to be living in a time when medicine brings healing of maladies that used to mean a death sentence. Even with Covid-19, these are

still precious times. I have a new appreciation, a different appreciation for blue skies, clear air and clean water. "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." Do you see it? That text presumes there is a God in heaven who saves and loves and walks with us in the cool of the day and in blinding heat.

You have seen some of the realities I have referred to. You have seen God's word become the lyric of a popular song, sung by the balance of the people who heard it. And therefore once again, having seen....you are witnesses.

May God bless you. Do your best to stay safe. Let us pray.

Lord we bow before YOU, thankful for the times in which we are living. We thank YOU for life given. We thank YOU for life preserved. We thank YOU for the hope of eternal life, because we do know there will come a moment when we are called into your presence, and life as we have known it will end. Walk with us in the times we share. Increase our faith in preparation for the time to come. Touch the sick with Your loving mercy. Make whole that which is broken. Especially we ask be with those who have been through surgery and treatment this past week. Heal our woundedness in the precious name of Jesus. Amen