

A Time For Everything

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 Revelation 21:1-6

Scott B. Martin – December 28, 2008

Yesterday morning I was raking up the leaves in my back yard. I had just finished making 10 neat piles and had sat down to take a break. The sun was shining, the birds were singing and then at 11:05 a gust of wind came up. The clouds that had been in the distance were swirling over me. The temperature began to drop. The predicted cold front had arrived. The wind didn't let up, if anything it got stronger. The few remaining leaves in the oak trees began to shower down. Some of my neatly piled leaves were beginning to blow around. Sitting in my chair watching this it did indeed occur to me that **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ... a time to rake and a time to let the leaves fall.”** As they say, “timing is everything.” The difficulty is trying to figure out what it is time for and the obvious answer is not always right.

I was listening to a discussion of presidential election. One of the panelists made this observation on timing. He said that had John McCain won the Republican nomination in 2000 he would most likely have beaten John Kerry and become president, but that even though he won the Republican nomination in 2008 his time was past. On the other hand, given the outcome of the election, Barack Obama's time had come; but many of his advisors had told him to wait, that he was only a junior senator, that he would be a better candidate with more Washington experience. It turned out Obama was right and his advisors were wrong. Timing is everything. The trick is to figure out what time it is and what must be done in that moment.

Our lives are filled with many different times. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes does a good job outlining some of them. For The Teacher life is lived, as it were, on pendulum between opposites: birth/death, weeping/laughing, tearing down/building up, love/hate, silence and speaking, etc. We could add other opposites: winning/losing, doubt/faith, sinning and living righteously, etc.

Anyone who looks at history or their own life over a period of time will recognize the truth of what we have said so far and what The Teacher observed long ago. The BIG question is “Is all of this somehow predetermined?”

I use to have a church member in Wichita, Joe Fusco. He was an ex-New York Italian. He loved to argue but he had a big heart. He shared with The Teacher of Ecclesiastes a love for good food and wine. He told me once that of all the passages in the Bible this passage from Ecclesiastes was his favorite passage in the whole Bible. I always found this a bit curious. He didn't choose the 23rd Psalm or any of the other beautiful Psalms. He didn't choose the Beatitudes or any of Jesus' parables. He didn't choose any of the Gospel of John's powerful “I am” statements about who Jesus is. Of all the beautiful and hopeful passages he could have chosen, Joe chose “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:...”

Immediately after telling me Ecclesiastes 3 was his favorite passage he would tell me that he didn't believe in wearing seat belts because when it “was your time to die, it was your time to die and nothing could change it.” Basically Joe, like many people before and since, believed that fate, or God, or something predetermines everything that happens in life. There is nothing we can do to change it. What do you think?

I don't think this is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying. In fact, if you read the whole book one simply comes away with a sense that the writer didn't believe we can KNOW much of anything. He opens his book by saying “All is vanity.” The wisest human being is a fool if they think they have everything figured out. The self-indulgent rich person is a fool for trying to create meaning in their life through lavish living. The God that the writer of Ecclesiastes speaks of is essentially unknowable.

In spite of the belief that God is essentially unknowable and life is surrounded by impenetrable mystery the writer of Ecclesiastes does not totally give into nihilism. He does believe in some very basic things. He does think some actions are better than others. Friends make the going easier in life. Wisdom is better than foolishness, even though all eventually die, both the wise and the fool. Taking pleasure in one's work is good. It is better to be good than to be evil. Moderation in all things, including righteousness is a good. He writes, “...it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

What a contrast we have in the book of Revelation. John on Patmos has a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. The writer of Ecclesiastes had no such vision. John is able to see into the future. He is able to see right to the throne of God. John's God may be awesome and mysterious but John's God allows John a glimpse of the direction earth and heaven is heading towards. The vision is not one of opposites, but a place where **"death will be no more"** a place where **"God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"**, a place where the thirsty will be given water **"as a gift from the spring of the water of life."**

John offers amazing assurance that **"God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples; and God will be with them;..."** What a contrast this is to the writer of Ecclesiastes' vision.

Now, some might be say, "This may be true but this doesn't happen until the end of the world, until history is wrapped up in a blanket and is no more, what about NOW?"

Did you hear some echo's from other places in the Bible when John assures us that God's dwelling place will be with us? You should. Through most of the Old Testament the Jews are told that God was their God and they were God's people, that an eternal covenant relationship existed between them. We just celebrated the message of the Christmas, that in the Christ, God came and dwelt with us, Emmanuel, God with us. Now John assures us that the world is moving in the direction of God creating a dwelling place where we may dwell with God. Taken as a whole, the message is that God has been with us in the past, God is with us now and God will be with us in the future. In other words God is with us in all our times and places.

This can give us hope and courage in times of weeping, war, dying, and mourning. This can add even more joy to times of birthing, harvesting, loving, laughing, peace, and healing. No matter what the New Year brings may we as individuals, as a church, as a nation and as a world, sense God's life-giving presence with us.

Because we have faith that this is true, even if when we look at what is happening around us we see no evidence of it we can pray the prayer that St. Francis prayed. Let us pray it together.

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

O Divine Master,

*grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.*