



**“For Everything There is a Season”  
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
July 18, 2010  
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

Our church family has seen more than its share of heartache over the past two weeks. Four members perished in a stretch of eight days. Dick Leonard, a brilliant yet humble man who worked on the Manhattan Project, went in for what was not life-threatening surgery yet never recovered. Barbara McCauley, a gracious woman who carried out her own caring ministry of listening to other’s problems, died after a prolonged illness. Betty Coker, sweet and kind yet in frail health, lost her battle. Art Butters, a gentle and good man who was one of our active deacons died of a sudden heart attack.

Deaths in a church family are never neatly spaced out over time. Death tends to strike in clusters and often occurs in January and February. Some people seem to will themselves to make it through one last Christmas before they die, plus the stress of a harsh winter is enough to tip the scales for people who are vulnerable.

Meeting with bereaved families, putting together memorial services, standing next to a casket in a cemetery, placing ashes in our Memorial Garden, praying for surviving loved ones, searching for words of comfort and assurance have all served as stark reminders of the fragility of life, the inevitability of death and the great benefit of an active spiritual life. Dealing with one death after another could leave me cynical or depressed if I did not have faith in God’s everlasting love.

Handling four deaths in such a short time highlighted the importance of each of us facing our own death while we are still healthy. As I met with the families, I found that some people had made advance plans and discussed them with their loved ones, while others had not. Some families knew what life support measures to invoke, others weren’t so sure. Some knew which funeral home to contact, others had no clue. Some had been left with clear information regarding legal matters, financial information and a memorial service; others had to wing it as best they could during a time of intense emotional distress.

If you are over 21, does your family know where to find your will? Do they know your wishes if they are faced with decisions regarding life support? Do they know whether you want to be buried or cremated? Do they know where to bury your remains? Is there a particular passage of Scripture you want read or a specific hymn you want sung?

If you love your family and you want to help them at a time when they will genuinely need help, please provide them with the information they will need when you die. There is a form entitled “Intentions at the Time of Death” on the literature table in the main hall that can provide your loved ones and the church with helpful information. It will provide you with peace of mind knowing that you have spelled out your desires.

The first of the recent memorial services was for long-time member, Dick Leonard. Anyone who knew Dick, a bright yet practical man who cared a great deal for his family, would not be surprised to learn that he had made clear his intentions while he was still healthy and he had taken steps to make his passing as easy as possible on his children. Also, Dick had left information with Westminster. As soon

as we learned that he had died, we went to the church file, found the information that had been given to us, and we immediately knew his favorite hymns and a couple of Scriptures that he wished to have read at his service. One of his requests was the third chapter of Ecclesiastes: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

When we flip through the pages of the Bible, we find such variety. Some passages of Scripture tell the history of the Hebrew people, other passages lay down the law of how God wants us to live; some trumpet praise and thanksgiving, others warn of God’s judgment on injustice; some present the parables Jesus shared, others point to a future realm where tears are wiped away and all live together in peace. Today’s passage comes from a different genre: a wisdom writing that focuses on basic truths about life.

The Book of Ecclesiastes has long had its fans, but more often its critics. From early times, many have argued that it should be removed from the list of sacred books, yanked right out of the Bible. However, it has held fast and remained a fixture of our Scriptures because it resonates with what we know to be true about life. It is not always a pleasant truth and it is not always what we wish to hear, but it echoes our experience. One interpreter put it this way: “Here is the most real of the realists of the sacred writers.”<sup>1</sup>

The name of the book’s author is a mystery, but we know his title. In Hebrew, the title is Qohelet; in Greek, Ecclesiastes. It means “the one who leads a congregation.” Thus, it is interpreted by some as “preacher,” by others as “teacher.” The author certainly has a great deal to teach and today’s passage has become its most popular pericope.

The message is matter-of-fact and sobering. The teacher does not pretend that life is better than it is. He does not attempt to paint a perfect picture, the life of our fondest dreams. Instead, he is realistic, practical and honest in his assessment of life.

Life is not all beauty, love and happiness; there is also pain, strife and loss. Life certainly includes joy, laughter and dancing, but there is also a heavy side. Life can be rich and satisfying, but life can also be dangerous and sorrowful. Life includes the whole package of light and darkness, so we should embrace its gifts and learn from its hardships.

The teacher in this morning’s passage says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die.” He does not say there is a proper time or an appointed time to die, and he certainly does not say that we will know the time. Neither does he attempt to explain why we die. He simply declares we do.

We know this to be undeniably true, but we often put it out of our minds. Death can be a disturbing reality to ponder. Much of our time we take measures to avoid thinking about it. Death prompts fear and anxiety; it triggers anger and sadness. Death reminds us that our time is limited.

The knowledge that death limits our time on earth can make us depressed or cynical. It can create within us a defiant spirit that incites us to constantly fight against it. However, that is a losing battle. All that comes into existence will perish. It is a hard lesson; but a vital one.

Knowing that death limits our time on earth can lead to sorrow, but it can also lead to wisdom. Awareness that our time is limited gives life vitality. It gives added importance to the present. It prompts us to do what we need to do before the sand in the hour glass runs out. It reminds us to express our love to others before it’s too late and to make meaningful contributions to the world while we are still able.

Of the four recent deaths in our congregation, two were expected, one was mildly surprising and one was shocking. Art Butters, one of our active deacons, was only 63 years old and, from all appearances, in good health. He worked out regularly. But last Sunday morning as he was preparing to come to our 8:15 a.m. worship service, he had a massive heart attack and died. It could happen to any of us.

To ignore or deny death is to be foolish. To recognize it as inevitable can lead to wisdom. None of us knows our last day. It could be many years from now or it could be this afternoon. The end might come following a long illness that provides us an opportunity to get all of our affairs in order, or we might go in the blink of an eye without even a chance to say good-bye. The one who is wise is the one who does not put off until later matters of importance.

Finally, the Teacher's sobering words: "There is a time to be born and a time to die" can remind us that even though life can be unfair, it is a gift. We do not choose to be born or to die. It's out of our hands and beyond our control.

Episcopal priest, John Claypool, said the worst day of his life was in June of 1968. He and his wife sat in the office of a hematologist and heard words that brought their world crashing down. Their eight-and-a-half-year old daughter was suffering from acute lymphatic leukemia. They had known that something was wrong as she had ended the second grade, but had no idea it was so serious. When they recovered from the mind-numbing words, they asked the doctor what they could expect. The doctor was careful to say that he could not speak with specificity but he said, "Today, the average time from diagnosis to death for this kind of leukemia in this age child is eighteen months."

They did everything they could to hold back the disease. They constantly prayed for healing. They sought out the best medical assistance they could find. But despite all of their efforts, exactly ten days beyond the eighteen months, in her own room one Saturday afternoon with the snow softly falling outside the window, they lost the battle.

In the weeks that followed, they experienced all the sadness, confusion and fatigue that accompany profound grief. They felt exhausted all of the time, but could not sleep. Again and again, Claypool would wake up at 2:00 a.m. and be unable to go back to sleep. One night he decided not to thrash around in bed until daylight, so he got up and went downstairs and pulled out a commentary on the book of Genesis by a German theologian named, Gerhardt Van Rod. He opened to the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter and read the strange story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. That story had always been dark and obscure to him; a primitive story when human beings had the sense that God was hostile and had to be appeased.

However, Van Rod gave him an entirely different understanding of the story. He helped Claypool see that the point was whether or not Abraham remembered from where Isaac had come. Did he remember that life is a gift, that birth is a windfall, that everything comes to us through a graciousness that is utterly beyond us? It suddenly dawned on Claypool that their daughter was a gift, not a possession. He realized he had a choice to make. He could take the road of gratitude or the road of resentment. He could live the remainder of his life with his fist in the face of God or he could be grateful that she had ever been given to them at all.<sup>2</sup>

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die." But what makes all the difference in the quality of our lives is whether we realize that the time we have between birth and death is a gift. It's all a gift.

#### NOTES:

1. W. Sibley Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume V*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p.267.
2. John Claypool, "When the Bible Becomes Your Bible," on the *30 Good Minutes* website, January 11, 1998, and also in "Hopeful Coping with Grief," December 1, 2002 on *30 Good Minutes* website.