



“A Time to Be Born”
Scripture – Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 27, 2020

The Book of Ecclesiastes is unlike any other book of the Bible. Rather than stories to encourage faith or instructions on how to live or anthems praising God, it contains a philosopher’s reflections on life.

Throughout the ages this book of wisdom has had its fans, but more often its critics. From early times, many argued that it should be removed from the list of sacred books, yanked out of the Bible. However, it has held fast and remained a fixture of Scripture because it resonates with what we know to be true about life. It is not always a pleasant truth, but it echoes our experience.

The unknown author of Ecclesiastes does not attempt to paint a perfect picture, the life of our fondest dreams. Instead, he is realistic, pragmatic, and sobering in his assessment of life.

Life is not all beauty and happiness; there is also pain and loss. Life certainly includes laughter and joy, but there is also a heavy side to life. Life includes the whole package of light and darkness.

Today’s reading is the most well-known passage of the book. It is occasionally read at funerals and in 1965, the rock group, The Byrds, turned its text into a number one record. We read: “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 certainly does not mince words, does he? Neither does he ease his way into this harsh truth. Every person and every creature that comes into existence also passes away. We step onto the stage of life and are physically present for a time and then our bodies give way. In a similar vein, the 90th Psalm says, “The days of our life are 70 years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong.” I’m pushing for a footnote at the end of that line that says, “or 90 plus if you are a member of Westminster!” As I’ve noted before, Westminster members shatter longevity records.

Perhaps our ancient philosopher simply wanted to remind his audience that death is part of the rhythm of life. Inherent in his admonition is the message: “Do not fritter away your days because you will not be here forever.”

However, I wonder. Could this sage have had in mind some double entendre? Perhaps in addition to noting that human beings die, he might have been saying that *ways of thinking* and *patterns of behavior* also die.

One way of thinking must end for a new one to be born. Perhaps in the innocence of childhood, all the world seemed beautiful and everyone who entered our sphere could be trusted. Then, one day we encountered something cruel and our initial way of viewing the world died and a new perspective was born. This pattern of dying and being born repeats itself many times in life. Sometimes it is thrust upon us and we have no choice. Other times

we make a conscious decision to let go of a perspective that no longer makes sense, so that a new one can come to life.

Can you name something personal that needs to die in you so that something new can be born? Perhaps you have a short fuse or a prejudice against certain people or a habit of bending the truth. Perhaps you are unwilling to admit when you are wrong or you always need to be in control. Perhaps you are unwilling to forgive or possess a need to always win. Could this be the season for something unattractive about yourself to die so that something worthy can be born?

Our ancient writer adds: “There is a time to kill and a time to heal.” Perhaps this is a time to kill a particular way of being that is not healthy for yourself or anyone around you, and now is the time to begin the process of healing your psyche and your soul.

Of course, it is not easy to kill a way of being that has become second nature and so we find excuses to put it off. We ask ourselves, “Is now really the right time to begin to work on this?” John O’Donohue says that “Beginnings often frighten us because they seem like lonely voyages into the unknown.”¹ What happens when you embark on a voyage into the unknown? You become vulnerable. The confident capsule that clothes you falls away. You become susceptible to...well that’s part of the problem isn’t it? You do not know exactly what you might be opening yourself to. Change for sure, but what kind of change?

Often times, we are afraid of taking a risk and so we lower our sails and our journey never ventures beyond familiar waters. We remain where we are. Only a vivid awareness brought about by a crisis can motivate us to make the changes we need to make.

Krista Tippett, the host of *On Being*, was interviewing Rev. angel Williams recently and paraphrased one of the ideas of her guest. She said, “There is something dying in our society and there’s something dying in us individually. And what is dying ... is the willingness to remain in denial (of the critical moment in which we are living).”²

This moment has been building for years. The commandment of Jesus – to love your neighbor – and the principles upon which this nation was founded – liberty and justice for all – have been under assault. Millions of us suppressed and avoided the toxicity in our nation, but we are no longer in denial about it.

2020 has become a pivotal year. Concerns that had been a part of our awareness have become intense and unbearable. Covid-19 changed our world. It heightened our awareness of the fragility of life and dramatically altered our routines. Travel ground to a halt, the economy took a severe blow, millions lost their jobs, the inequality mask was ripped off, and people secluded themselves from others. The change in basic routines, the specter of death, and fear of the unknown has turned people anxious and edgy.

Nature has added to the extremes of the year. This year is on pace to set a record for total number of Atlantic hurricanes. Worse, record-setting wildfires sparked by drought conditions in Australia and the American West, have burned nearly 20 million acres of land. In Australia, it is estimated that a billion animals died.³

This past week piled on the grim news for 2020. Despite the fact that police used a “no knock” warrant for a man already in police custody, broke into a woman’s home and pumped her full of six bullets, a grand jury in Kentucky ruled that not one of the officers would be charged in her death. One officer was charged for firing into an adjacent apartment.

As if the deluge of disasters had not already exceeded our quota for shocking news, the president did something outrageous even by his standards. He threatened to undermine one of the basic tenets of a democracy, by refusing to commit to a peaceful transfer of power if he loses the election.

However, despite all of the dreadful events of the year, in my mind one event stands above all others: the murder of George Floyd. Witnessing a black man face down on the pavement, slowly being suffocated by a white police officer, was unnerving. It pierced the conscience of millions who had been in a state of denial over the toxicity that exists in our nation and prompted them to take to the streets in hundreds of cities. The lack of emotion and calm expression of Officer Derek Chauvin as he buried his knee into the neck of George Floyd may serve as an unconscious metaphor in the minds of many. The events of the year have left many with the feeling that our nation is gasping for air.

Could this be the turning point? Could it be the time when the toxicity dies so that something new can be born? Could it be the time when we kill what is killing us so that we can begin to heal? Seeing so many young white people marching with people of color is a sign of hope. The time is ripe for us to move in a new direction.

When you protest against injustice you are engaged in a serious spiritual practice. You are practicing exactly what the prophet Micah meant when he called on people of faith “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8) When you align yourself with people who are oppressed, you align yourself with the prophet Isaiah who said, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and...to set the oppressed free?” (Isaiah 58:6) When you march for human rights, you stand side-by-side with the prophet Amos who said that God wants us to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24). When you take a stand for the dignity of all people regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, or economic standing, you are faithfully executing the command of Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39)

There is a time to die and a time to be born. The time is ripe for deception, injustice, hate, and violence to die. The time for truth, justice, love, and peace to be born is upon us.

NOTES

1. John O’Donohue, *Benedictus*, (London: Bantam Press, 2007), p. 20.
2. Krista Tippett, “Why 2020 Hasn’t Taken Rev. angel by Surprise,” *OnBeing.org*, September 10, 2020.
3. Mihir Zaveri and Emily S. Rueb, “How Many Animals Have Died in Australia’s Wildfires?” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Holy God, during these early days of autumn, we are reminded of the constancy of change. Seasons turn; babies are born; dear ones die; life’s chapters draw to a close; new chapters begin. And, through it all, you are faithful; your steadfast love endures forever. As flowers fade and trees turn golden, we take comfort that You – O God – are Lord of *all* time and *all* creation.

There is a time to seek, you tell us. In this hour we have set apart as sacred, we seek you, O God. We seek your peace, your hope, your joy. We seek your grace. We seek your love. Open our hearts to your Spirit stirring within and among us, and awaken us to your presence.

Comforting God — As our nation reaches the tragic milestone of losing 200,000 souls to COVID-19, as communities from Florida to California reel from natural disasters, as we continue to reckon with a legacy of injustice – we know too well that there is a time to weep, a time to mourn. So many families across our country

and around the world are suffering ... some from circumstances that make headlines, many more from what could be called “ordinary” losses, which take an extraordinary toll. God, you are no stranger to suffering. Be present with these, your children, as they grieve. And give us all the grace to surround them with compassionate care.

Ever-Present God — In this strange season, we see that there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. As this pandemic wears on, we are weary of this time to refrain from embracing and we are worn down by prolonged separation. We lift before you all who are lonely, all who are isolated, all who are craving community. Draw near to us, we pray, and help us draw near to one another – even across distances and devices.

Generous God — As we weep with those who weep, we also rejoice with those who rejoice. We are grateful that – even in chaotic seasons – there is still a time to laugh, a time to dance. And we give thanks for reasons to celebrate: births and birthdays, the splendor of your creation, time to spend with loved ones, opportunities for growth, glimpses of grace.

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Loving God, we seek to spend our days glorifying you. Help us to be faithful to you in all things. Pluck up that which threatens to separate us from you and one another, and plant within us seeds of love and peace. Give us the grace to break down walls that divide, and the courage to build bridges of reconciliation. And free us, we pray, from the forces of destruction and death, so that a new spirit may be born within us.

This we pray in the name of your son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.