

“Seasons and Moments”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 14, 2020

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, 3:1-11

In Louisville, Kentucky – my hometown – protests have been ongoing for more than two weeks in response to the death not only of George Floyd, but also of a black woman, Breanna Taylor, who was murdered in her bed in a police raid gone horribly wrong; followed by the gunshot death of another black man, David McAtee, a popular restaurant owner at the hands of the National Guard. The police chief has been replaced, policy reforms have been proposed, but – as it has in so many other places – these incidents have also served to lift the veil on deep-rooted, systemic cultural and societal problems.

What are we to make of this national moment of calls for social reform and racial justice? As a result of this season when millions of people from around the country – and around the world – have taken to the streets demanding change, will it really happen?

A cynic might respond with words like what we heard in today’s first reading; as the voice of Ecclesiastes says:

⁹ Whatever has happened—that’s what will happen again; whatever has occurred—that’s what will occur again. There’s nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰ People may say about something: “Look at this! It’s new!” But it was already around for ages before us.

Thirty-eight times through the course of this book, the author says, “all is senseless vanity.” What some might consider a cynic, others would call a realist; refusing to look at life through rose-colored glasses. For him, things simply are the way they are, set in motion by God. The universe unfolds according to its own inner logic and set of seasons. Only God knows why human existence is set up the way it is. Thus, in the reality of this inscrutable world, we should not waste energy railing against life itself.¹ Instead, the best advice is to enjoy what we can, when we can, while waiting and working for change where and when possible.

¹ Joanna Adams, “There Ought to Be a Clock in the Sanctuary” from *Day1.org*

Life is a series of seasons. This poem about seasons, with its fourteen pairs of opposing realities, encapsulates some of the most important aspects of human life: birth and death, love and hate, war and peace, mourning and dancing, embracing and separating. Every life passes through these seasons, and we shouldn't expect it to be otherwise. We will all celebrate births and mourn deaths. We will discover new relationships and let go of old ones. We will dance in celebration and mourn in grief. This is all to be expected and cannot be avoided.

And so, when we are living through something difficult, we know that a better time will come. Because life moves in seasons, there is no experience that will last forever. But, the reverse is also true: when we experience a happy season, we cannot expect it to last forever. As we learned in last week's reading, "the best thing is to enjoy yourself for as long as you can."

Still, life is not just a series of seasons, it is a series of opposite seasons: life and death, love and hate, dancing and mourning. If you are looking for gain, the good and the bad might seem to cancel each other out. But that does not mean life is nothing; instead, it is all those moments of beauty and horror, hope and despair, joy and pain – bounded by birth on one end and death on the other.²

In the Hebrew tradition, this book of Ecclesiastes – like the book of Proverbs – falls within the wisdom tradition. We may all pass through the seasons, but knowing what time it is differentiates the foolish from the wise. Some people refuse to let go of a relationship that has ceased to be nourishing; or hold-on-for-dear-life to that which is actually finished and gone. They try to breathe life into that which is already dead, but no one is brave enough to bury it in the ground.

This brings us back – I believe – to the question of what this amazing moment of unrest may mean. For far too long, white people – those for whom privilege has been embedded into the fabric of our nation – have lived as if systemic racism is just the way things are. In the city where I grew up – where segregated neighborhoods were integrated only by mandatory school integration – race was always an issue; although, as a white person, I was not always forced to acknowledge it. And yet, if my skin was a different color, the police would have treated me differently; my educational opportunities would have been more limited; and there are many places I went where I would not have been welcomed.

² Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*

The people of my hometown – as with people all around the country – are waking up to this reality. It may have taken moments of violence, anger, grief and pain to make it happen, but people of all colors are beginning to realize that there will be no justice unless there is justice for all; no peace unless all have the privilege of living peacefully. There is a growing understanding that the system is not equal, that it needs to change. And those – like me – who have benefitted from these systemic inequities are beginning to understand the need to repent, to listen, and to work together for a better common good.

And so, though the wisdom writer maintains in Ecclesiastes that there will be hatred and violence in this world, we should not believe for a moment that he condones either. He is simply stating the fact. Let us not forget that Jesus came into a world of inequity and war, of injury and mourning. He came to show us the way to a higher ground. He announced and gave directions for a peaceable kingdom; which God intended and which he came to restore. He came to defeat all things – all sins and all systems – that would separate us from God and from one another.

And so, as Christians, we never say, *well, that's just the way things are*. If there ever were a season to kill, now is the time to kill racism and replace it with equality. If there ever was a moment to sow seeds of justice, and eradicate our deep-rooted systems of injustice, the time is now. It is time for the reconciling love of God to be made manifest in us and our neighborhoods, our cities, our nation, and our world. We need the wisdom to know what time it is.

“There is a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens.” It is good that God has created order in life. We hear in the words of this poem a challenge to be wise, to be ethical, and to discern when one's actions are in keeping with God's time. There is a time for God's people to act decisively, with humility, and with an eye toward justice. Jesus tells us to love even our enemies. This is not the time to hold on to hate when we are called instead to love. It is not the time to refuse to let go of systems that were built on inequality, but to seize opportunities for justice to roll down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The concluding verses of today's reading again inquires about what profit we gain from life:

⁹ *What do workers gain from all their hard work?* ¹⁰ *I have observed the task that God has given human beings.* ¹¹ *God has made everything fitting in its time,*

but has also placed eternity in their hearts, without enabling them to discover what God has done from beginning to end.

Only human beings – among all creatures – have the capacity to think about our legacy; it is a part of our nature. And yet, the wisdom writer seems to say, it is better if we do not dwell on it. Will what we do make a difference? Will this particular moment in time bring greater justice to this world; will it mean that, in cities like Louisville, black women and men no longer die; that the bonds of systemic racism will be broken? Will God’s peaceable kingdom finally come?

The honest answer is that only God knows. But what we can know is that we are called to pay attention to the moments and seasons of life. We are to love those we can love and serve those we can serve. We are to dance when we are joyful and to mourn when there is loss. We are to enjoy the good food and wine that God grants us, and to use the resources we have been given wisely. In this season, we are called to confront a racial crisis, even in the midst of this tragic and persistent health crisis.

Thus, in this particular moment of time, we are called to love one another by protecting ourselves and others from exposure to disease. The season will come when we will once again be able to gather together as God’s people face-to-face; to greet one another with signs of peace. The season will come when we can safely sing praises to God and embrace our children and go on mission trips and serve meals and North Church. The proper moment will arrive when we can picnic together on the side lawn and share coffee and conversation in the Fellowship Hall. The time will come again when people will come from east and west and north and south and gather together at the Lord’s Table, when we will be given a foretaste of the eternal banquet that God is preparing for us; where people of every age and race and tongue will share in the grace and glory of God together. That day will come. Sisters and brothers, let us work and pray for the season to turn, and let us maintain hope that God – in God’s inscrutable wisdom – has indeed made everything fitting in its time. Amen.