

For Everything a Season

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by expressing my most sincere thanks to everyone who has phoned, emailed, or texted words of condolences and support over the past few days in the wake of my grandmother's tragic death on Friday.

I think I speak on behalf of my parents and our entire family when I say that your support means a great deal. It is during times like these that being part of a community is such a gift.

Needless to say, I was preparing a very different sermon for Epiphany Sunday. I was going to preach on a coronation psalm and contrast the kings of Israel's past with the king revealed at Epiphany. I was going to talk about King Solomon and King Jesus and about the gap that exists between the real and the ideal in our own lives.

And then, death intruded.

For those who might not be aware, my grandma died in tragic circumstances on Friday morning. She was ninety-two, but probably in better health than many people thirty years her junior. She was still very much full of life and love.

Her loss is a big one and it feels big. My grandmother was the anchor of our large family, the glue that held us together. She was the common, persistent, faithful thread that wove through all of our lives.

A number of people in the church encouraged me not to worry about the sermon today, to just use an old one, or fill the space in some other way. But whatever else is entailed in the role of "pastor," I think part of it is a responsibility to try to give theological language to all of life, even the really hard parts.

So, I scrapped the Epiphany sermon I was planning on preaching and wrote a new one. I regret that my sermon likely won't fit with other elements of the service in the way that I was planning,

but sometimes things happen that can't be anticipated.

There are a lot of texts that show up in the lectionary that I never have the chance to preach on.

There are suggested readings for days that we don't tend to have services on. Like New Year's Day, for example.

One of the assigned readings for the beginning of a new year this year was the one that was just read from Ecclesiastes. I read it a few days, and I thought, "You know, I should really preach on that passage some day..."

Well, it turns out that today is that day.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...

This is a well-known passage, popularized by The Byrds in the 60's, and no doubt resonant with the experience of many.

There's a rhythmic cadence to it—one that we intuitively understand as we look at the world and our own lives. Seasons for sowing and reaping and weeping and laughing and mourning and dancing and tearing and mending... Yeah, that seems to fit what we see.

Life has ups and downs and everything in between and this passage reflects that.

For everything a season...

Even a season to die.

We all know that we will die, much as we prefer not to think about it.

I know that I will die, and I knew that my grandma would die.

But I struggled with those lines as I read them this weekend. *A season for everything?*

A casual reading of this passage makes it sound like everything in the world has some kind of predestined time and place, like there's a piece of a giant puzzle waiting to be filled by every specific thing that happens under the sun.

But is there really a season for a death like my grandma's?

I imagined that her season would involve a gradual decline and a relatively peaceful death surrounded by a family who loved her. I did not imagine that her season would involve a fire and

dying alone.

It seems cruel, random, pointless. It seems like less than she deserved. It seems like the God that she spent over nine decades serving might have seen fit to give her a better death.

I struggled with this text this weekend. I'm still struggling with it.

Perhaps you have struggled along similar lines. I know there are people in this room who have endured tragedies of all kinds. Some have lost children, some have lost spouses. Some have gone through painful experiences and seasons that seem utterly without reason or hope.

The writer of Ecclesiastes struggled with it, too. Ecclesiastes is well-known to be among the bleakest books in the bible. The book famously begins with the words, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless!"

Even in this morning's passage, after the whole, "For everything, there is a season" part, the writer says,

I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; **yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.**

No, we very often can't. Nothing brings this into sharper focus than death's intrusion.

We are a mist. A vapour. Here today, gone tomorrow. *A quiver in the dirt*, as one of my favourite songs from David Gray puts it.

There's a season for everything, but nobody can figure out what God's up to...

The writer of Ecclesiastes kind of throws up his hands in the face of all this and says,

"I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live (Ecc. 3:12).

Make the best of it. Grab whatever happiness you can while you can. Do some good along the way.

It's not the worst advice in the world, but it doesn't seem like enough for many of us. It leaves too much unfinished. It seems to give death and suffering the last word.

We need more than this.

We didn't hear Ecclesiastes 3:15 this morning. Our reading ended two verses earlier. But

Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

God will call the past to account? I'm not a Hebrew scholar, I checked a couple of other English translations:

NASB – “for God seeks what has passed by.”

ESV – “God seeks what has been driven away.”

KJV – “God requireth that which is past.”

NRSV – “God seeks out what has gone by.”

The writer thinks that God will somehow demand something from the past, that he will seek out what has gone for the purposes, one assumes, of repairing or addressing it somehow.

Christians are, perhaps, accustomed to reading books like Ecclesiastes as something like “this is what people thought before Jesus arrived on the scene.”

Things were barren, futile, hopeless, and meaningless until God did something new in Christ. Christianity is, after all, a response to something new—God Incarnate, come to save his people, the God who “gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not (Rom. 4:17), the God who we believe will usher in a new heaven and a new earth, where the old order of things has passed away (Rev. 21:1, 4).

With all of that Christian “stuff” going on in our heads, it may be tempting to read Ecclesiastes as nothing more than the diagnosis of a problem for which the gospel is the cure.

But apparently, even the Teacher, who knew nothing about Jesus, had a hope that the past would *not* be lost, that God expected something of it, that history might just be more than an aimless set of cyclical repetitions and births and deaths, that what was gone was not really gone.

In a tiny little phrase surrounded by laments about the meaninglessness and futility of human life and frustration about the limitations of human existence, the Teacher gives voice to the profoundly human hope that that there will, in fact, be something new under the sun.

We need this hope.

There's a phrase that I've been reading in my morning prayer over the last little while.

Grant that I, Lord, may not be anxious about earthly things, but love things heavenly; and even now, while I am placed among things that are passing away, hold fast to those that shall endure...

I read these words again this morning.

My temptation in the past is to rush past them mechanically, at times supplying a quick inventory of the things in my life that tend to make me anxious, at times pondering the heavenly things that I ought to be loving instead of the earthly things that so easily take hold of my fickle affections.

But I've never spent much time on that middle clause: "even now, while I am placed among things that are passing away."

I paused there this morning. How could I not, given death's intrusion?

I thought about all the things that are passing away—things that so naturally produce anxiety, in our world and in my own soul.

About my kids who are growing up way too fast, about the choices and the challenges they will face in the world.

About the things that I cling to for identity and status in the world and how these things will, inevitably, fade away.

About how history so reliably repeats itself, and how so much of it comes to nothing in the end.

About friends and family and the inevitable losses that we will all face.

About those in our church family who have suffered loss in 2018 and what losses 2019 might hold.

I thought about my grandma.

I looked out my window and grumbled to God that I would rather be placed somewhere other than among things that are passing away.

I would prefer to be placed among other, better things—things that are being renewed, for example, or at the very least things that are staying the same long enough for me to get a handle on them.

But grumbling rarely gets me very far, whether to God or to anyone else.

Far better to focus on how I might learn and grow and possibly change, even now, while I am

placed among things that are passing away.

There are always lessons to be learned.

To cling less tightly to things, perhaps.

To invest less in what ultimately matters very little.

To be relieved of the burden (and forgiven of the sin) of imagining that I am my own little god tasked with managing my own little domain of grievances, trials, and tribulations (real or imagined).

To have more grace.

To not expect from things that are passing away what can only come as gifts from God.

To be at peace with my neighbour, with the world, and with God.

And, of course, to hold fast to what will endure. Which is what, exactly?

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Cor. 13:13).

Grant that I, Lord, may not be anxious about earthly things, but love things heavenly...

The heavenliest thing to love is, of course, God. And God is love.

In love, God created us. In love, Jesus came to us, lived for us and died for us. In love, God raised him from the dead.

And in love, God will “call the past to account.” He will bind every wound and wipe away every tear.

All the things that *should not have been* under the sun, will be remembered no more.

The Christian hope is that there will indeed be something new under the sun, a new season where all things are made new. And all for love’s sake.

So love is to be our habit and our home while we are here, placed among things that are passing away.

Many of you know that my grandmother had a habit of emailing her children and grandchildren

every morning. The story goes, she was grumbling to one of her kids one day that they should come see her more often—*I could be dead for all you know!*

My uncle, being a sensitive soul, said, “Well, why don’t you just email us every morning and tell us that you’re not dead.” He surely wins the prize for that response.

But my grandma, being a stubborn soul, decided to do just that. I have a file on my computer with six years’ worth of morning emails in it. I anticipate combing through it this week as I prepare for her funeral.

She would talk about the weather, about anniversaries and birthdays in the family, about what she was reading, about who in her family was traveling where at the moment. Sometimes she would share entries and stories from past diaries.

Nearly every single email ended with a quote, a bible verse, and an expression of her love for us.

I think that my grandma knew that there is indeed a season for everything under the sun, but more importantly that every season is a season for love.

One of my grandma’s last emails ended with these words:

And just before bedtime I read this prayer: “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, for the year that is past, we give thanks. For the year we are about to enter we seek Your guidance and protection. Our lives are in Your hands.”

It’s not easy to read those words knowing what would happen only a few days later. But even when tragedy strikes, we can give thanks because we believe that God’s hands are love’s hands.

Another recent email ended with a quote from St. Augustine:

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.

That’s a good way to end, I think. God loved my grandmother and she loved God.

God loves you. God loves me.

All the seasons of our lives are in God’s hands.

Amen.

