

Ecclesiastes 3, Genesis 1, Season themed Garden service sermon, Aug. 30, 2020

I can't claim to have done a scientific survey on this, but my hunch is that if you asked people who live along the North Shore what their single favorite month of the year is, a majority would say the month we're about to enter: September. I would be among that group. And I think that our reasoning is clear and self-evident: A good September brings together the best of both the summer and the fall into one month. In September, we often have days in that perfect weather range of 60 and 70s, yet the nights have a crisper quality to them; the wild flowers are make a final colorful statement; migrating birds are easily seen and enjoyed; and leaves turn to gold and crimson. There's a lot to like about September on the North Shore! It's also a month of significant seasonal transition; I mean now, in late August, we're still pretty clear that it's summer. And as October begins in another month, we're usually pretty clear that it's autumn. So the changeover between the two seasons happens now, in the September about to happen.

It was with this in mind that I chose the theme of "seasons" for this late August garden service. The assigned texts for this Sunday after Pentecost just seemed too theologically deep and weighty for a celebration of Creation in a Garden service. So, my thoughts drifted towards seasons and seasonal change, leading me to the two texts we heard read this morning by Carmen Beardsley. The first Scripture lesson came from the first chapter of Genesis, the beautiful liturgy of Creation, in which God places lights in the sky to separate day from night, to be signs for seasons, and years. This ancient and profound text speaks truth to this day of God as Creator and of how God placed into the order of Creation the stars and planets, the rotation of galaxies and our own earth, all of which contribute towards our ability to mark the difference between night

and day, days and months, seasons, and years. We hear this text several times during our standard 3 year lectionary and recognize it easily.

But the other text, Ecclesiastes 3, which speaks of seasons both physically and metaphorically, never comes up in our regular 3 year lectionary. Kind of surprising, isn't it, given its familiarity? But it's familiar for *other* reasons. If you're old enough, you remember the musical version of "Turn, Turn, Turn", popularized by Pete Seeger and by the Byrds in the mid 1960s. And regardless of age, you may have heard it read at a wedding, or most likely, at a funeral. The way this Scripture walks through the different seasons and times within a lifespan makes it a natural choice for ceremonies involving birth, marriage, or death. I have used this Scripture at many funerals, often outlining the life of the person who has died within its framework: a time to be born and a time to die, for example, giving their birth and death date. Or a time for war and a time of peace, speaking about the military service of a veteran. And so on. But hearing this Scripture *outside* of the context of a wedding or funeral and *within* the context of our present pandemic circumstances caused me to hear it differently. You know what jumped out at me within these verses right now? It was this verse, "A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." And the reason it spoke to me was that I pretty much haven't embraced anyone besides my husband since mid-March. I've seen friends and family members but we have refrained from embracing, even when it hurts. I'm guessing the same could be true for many of us right now...but who would have imagined that a global pandemic would set the stage for us to experience that particular season? The season of refraining from embracing. I suspect the original intent was closer to expressing the truth that sometimes it's right to be up close and personal with people and other times it's not; there's a time and a place for physical

intimacy of different kinds, as we all know. But in our context, that season is rather different than the writer of these words would have likely imagined.

In fact, much of our present season in global and national life is different and unique and unexpected. If we cultivate our awareness of entering now the most beautiful and richest of the natural seasons, we count ourselves blest. If we instead reflect upon the metaphorical season in which we find ourselves in as humanity, it's a different picture, isn't it? If we were to re-write Ecclesiastes 3 for the present season, what might we write? You should try it; I did. It boggles the mind, actually. How about: "There is a time to gather happily together to worship in church buildings, and a time to worship separately in our homes in front of a screen. There is a time to touch surfaces in stores or public buildings, and a time to use hand sanitizer as we leave. There is a time to wear a mask around others, and a time to take your mask off when alone. There is a time to participate in national elections, and a time to bear the consequences of national elections. There is a time to witness racial injustice, and a time to find ways to seek a more just peace." I would have to say that the season we are experiencing in common with much of humanity, is a dark season, an anxious season. And it stands in stark contrast to the natural season we are so fortunate to experience where we live, as we await harvesting apples off our apple trees, gathering around a fire on a cool evening, marveling at birch forests with sun-lit yellow leaves. I'm *so* grateful that God created seasons as a part of our natural order; I love that each season has its own distinct wonder. As the King James Version translates verse 11 of our text from Ecclesiastes, "God has made all things beautiful in their season." And it's true. How could we determine which season was most beautiful? An apple orchard in full blossom in spring.....a summer night with the full moon shining on Lake Superior.....an autumn ridge of

brilliant maples and birch in full color.....a wintry forest after snowfall outlined in pure, white flakes. How could you choose? Each is distinctly beautiful, perfectly exquisite, within its own season. And we live in a place where we see that beauty on display, and *it nurtures our souls*.

But the seasons of the human heart and of the larger world around us are not always so beautiful or so nurturing. Individually, we all recognize that there are seasons in our lives that are more likeable or productive or difficult or miserable than others. The seasons may be short-lived or may last a long while....times of grieving, times of exciting new beginnings; times of hard work, times of rest; times of illness, times of good fortune; times when love surrounds us, times when we feel alone. All of us have our own seasons and times of life, as this Scripture text suggests. And as a community, a nation, a planet, there are seasons as well---seasons of war, of peace; of destruction, of rebuilding; of prosperity, of want. All of this is true, yes...we can affirm the accuracy of these words from Ecclesiastes 3, but what's the point? What do we take away from this description of our reality? Of the acknowledgement that life doesn't stagnate, but moves from one season to another? Does that leave us resigned? Or hopeful? Or feeling like everything is random and out of our control?

How does our Scripture text address these questions? I think there are two recommendations within the final paragraph of our Scripture lesson this morning. In verses 13 and 14 we read, "I know there is nothing better for people than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in their efforts." These words encourage us to find what enjoyment in the present moment that we can. While I sometimes find myself feeling guilty for experiencing personal happiness in the

midst of global misery, there is actually some Scriptural justification for doing just that. God intends for us to enjoy all the good gifts and blessings God sends our way, including food, drink, and the satisfaction that comes from work. Whatever pleasure or inspiration we can find by immersing ourselves in the goodness of God, including the goodness of God as expressed in nature, is completely legitimate and desirable. To not do so would be wrong and ungrateful. It's not that we want to be uncaring, or unresponsive to all the needs and concerns around us, we are called to be both compassionate and proactive in our participation in this challenging world. But it is a good and wise thing for us to nurture our own soul and well-being by thoroughly embracing the blessings God sends our way. Especially in the beauty of the season we are entering.

But the other recommendation within these verses is in the final verse, verse 14. "I know what God does endures forever; all should stand in awe before God." In contrast to the change of seasons, to the transient nature of human life with its times of variability, God is forever. God is constant. God is faithful. For which reason, we stand in awe before God. Whereas so much is transitory, undependable and uncertain in this world, God is just the opposite: eternal, powerful, certain, reliable. We can *depend* upon God to be compassionate, just, loving, creative, strong. And we can depend upon God to be present with us, in whatever season we may find ourselves. That gives us the assurance we need to deal with all the changes and uncertainties which continually confront us in this season of unrest. God is steadfast, faithful, and ever looking to bless us and this whole world, which God so loves. We're about to sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness", my mother-in-law's favorite hymn. One of my favorites as well. This hymn celebrates both the beauty of seasons within the Created order *and* the eternal

and unchanging love of God. “Great is Thy faithfulness, morning by morning, new mercies I see. All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided; great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.”

Amen.