

Based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Seasons of Human Existence

There is something beautiful to be observed about life here in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia where, comparatively speaking, four seasons come and go in a rhythmic cycle that makes sense of the world. Three distinct months of Spring, followed by three distinct months of Summer, followed by three distinct months of Autumn, concluding with three distinct months of Winter.

By and large we know what to expect of each season: that summer will be sunny and warm - even hot and humid; that winter will be gray and snowy; that spring will sparkle and that autumn will dazzle. We have rituals and festivals to reflect on the wisdom of each season. And, while we often wish it were summer when it is winter - or winter when it is summer - we generally do not expect the season to be different than what it is. Seasons are what they are. After all, if we do not particularly like the season we are in, all we have to do is wait a few months and *voilà*, a whole new season sets in.

In the Jerusalem of our Lesson, however, there are only two seasons: summer and winter; wet and dry. A duality of seasons, if you will, that subconsciously shapes the life of the people, just as four seasons in the panhandle subconsciously shape ours.

From that duality, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes extrapolates the seasons of human existence, from birth to death and everything in between. The human condition, the Preacher observes, includes seasons of planting and seasons of reaping, seasons of building up and seasons of tearing down, seasons of weeping and seasons of laughing, seasons of love and seasons of hate, seasons of war and seasons of peace. We can no more change these seasons of human existence than we can change Hurricane Ian's path through Florida, and its remnants raining here on us today.

The Preacher is just as frustrated by the seasons of human existence as we are, struggling throughout the entire book of Ecclesiastes with his role to *teach the faith and equip the saints* no matter the season they find themselves in. I tried pursuing wisdom, the Preacher says, but that only increased my sorrow. I tried pursuing success, the Preacher says, but it left me feeling empty. I tried pursuing justice, the Preacher says, but the rain just keeps falling on the just and unjust alike.

Everything is just so incredibly messed up! the Preacher laments. *Vanity, vanity, all is vanity*, the translation into English says. Which isn't quite right when it comes to interpreting the Hebrew. *Hebel*, the Preacher calls it. Which is a bit more like the bumper sticker that reads “&\$it Happens.”

Which is where this preacher standing in front of you right now lands, too, I am afraid. Things are pretty messed up and it is hard to find a whole lot of hope that we who are human will get our act together enough to fix it. There are limits to being human, as much as we do insist we have power even beyond our wildest imagination. We just can't wave our magic wand and make the madness go away. As the Serenity Prayer reminds us, there are simply things we cannot change.

But there *are* things that we can! The first one being our attitude. As the Mexican liberation theologian Elsa Tamez says, *It is helplessness that thrusts human beings into the dimension of faith. Faith, in turn, gives the human being energy for life.* Which is where the Preacher also lands in the Lesson that is before us today. Yes, it is important to be realistic about the state of the World, the Preacher says, but my own attitude of frustration and helplessness is making things worse. The bottom line is, if the season is rainy the best thing to do is patch the roof. And collect water for the dry season, which will come sooner than we think.

Which brings us to our season as a congregation in our own little corner of the universe seeking to make sense of our calling for the *hebel* we find ourselves in. *What are we supposed to do?!* about the rise of Christian nationalism, or the war in Ukraine, or the coming climate crisis, or the mental health meltdown of America, or the decline of democracy, or even the up and down frustrations of our normal daily lives at home and at work.

To which the poet responds: *stitch up a hem, patch a tire, darn a hole in a uniform, make music with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum.* It is in the small, simple, steady acts of living that we partner with God to repair the world. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes says the same: eat, drink, find meaningful work, and share the company of those you love. This is how we know the grace of God.

To be clear, neither the Preacher nor the poet dismiss the *hebel* that hovers over us. They do not advocate hedonist escape from the responsibility to act with integrity in a world that is so incredibly messed up. Nor do they deny the power of movements for justice and peace to make radical change toward the vision of Beloved Community. What they suggest is more like a riff on the Buddhist quote: *Before Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.* Or, to quote another Buddhist teacher, *after the ecstasy, the laundry.*

For those of us who still need some glimmer of hope, it turns out the Preacher does not disappoint. As our Mexican liberation theologian points out, the very fact that we who are human continue to long for justice and freedom, for happiness and peace, the very fact that those concepts still hold resonance for us deep in our souls *is itself* a sign of hope! We have not yet, as a species, become so jaded that we no longer have the capacity even to imagine the world as we wish it would be.

So we can trust, in the seasons that are hard, that change for the better *will* come. And we can dedicate ourselves to those moments that bring joy to our lives in the midst of so much negativity. And we must never forget, when the seasons turn easy again, that we must use them to prepare for yet another turning of the tide.

One final note of hope from both the biblical Preacher in Ecclesiastes and the present preacher standing in your pulpit today is that this Lesson concludes, in the end, with *a time for peace. Shalom*, in the Hebrew, which is so much bigger than the absence of violence. Completeness, oneness, wellness, that all might thrive. *I swear it's not too late*, the classic song prays.

And that is our prayer, as well, on this Peacemaking Sunday in our own little corner of the universe. That somehow, someday, at the end of the day, peace will emerge as a perpetual season, for you and for me, for the

people of Ukraine, for those in the path of a hurricane, and for the entire planet. In the meantime, in the words of yet another poet, *we take the little that we know and we do the best we can and we save the rest for the quiet faith of man.*

Mexican Liberation Theology quotes from Tamez, Elsa. *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes*. Translated from Spanish by Margaret Wilde. Wipf & Stock: Eugene Oregon, 2000.

Poetry quotes from Alexander, Elizabeth. "Praise Song for the Day"