

A Time for Everything

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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Ecclesiastes is an unusual book of the Bible. It covers everything in life with bluntness, humor, and questioning. If you are an individual of doubt, then you could read this book. Here is some background information from the NRSV Harper Collins Study Bible (c1989, 986-988).

Ecclesiastes stems from the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew title, Qoheleth, the “Teacher,” who assumes the persona of King Solomon, Israel’s archetypal sage. Such literary association implicitly identified the book as legitimate Israelite wisdom and lent weight to its teaching.

Scholars have agreed that Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon, but by a later writer. The name Solomon does not appear in the book, and the Teacher’s claim to have wisdom “surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me” does not fit Solomon, whose only predecessor was David. The teacher takes the viewpoint of a subject rather than king, noting conditions of oppression, injustice, and social upheaval.

Fragments of the book found among the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community date to the mid-second century BCE. Most scholars date the book’s composition between 300 and 200 BCE.

The book sets a variety of wisdom forms (proverbs, parables, admonitions) in the loose context of the Teacher’s first-person address to the readers.

(p 986)

Attempts to find a clear structure in the book have not succeeded, and its tension-filled expression of life’s contradictions gives the book a puzzlelike character. The book’s unity rests on a complex consistency of language, viewpoint, and themes.

Ecclesiastes focuses upon the limits and contradictions of life in order to teach wisdom. In spite of life’s limits and destruction by death, the Teacher maintains wisdom is better than folly. The teacher repeatedly urges us to embrace life and its goods as gifts from God.

Ecclesiastes is not difficult to read, but its meaning as a whole is difficult.

Many scholars now recognize that the tensions and contradictions of Ecclesiastes are precisely its point. The Teacher is an utter realist, yet the Teacher will not let go of God.

(p 987)

This ends the background from the study bible.

There is a time for everything, and all that happens to people is in God's hands. The book of Ecclesiastes gives us insight into how to humanly respond to all that happens around us, both the easy and the difficult.

A time to be born, and a time to die. We experience birth and death in our biological families, in our church family, and in our community. Here at BAMF we have been blessed to welcome babies and to include them in our life as a congregation. On the other hand, we, as a faith community, have experienced death of young adults and senior members.

Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, experienced giving birth and facing the death of her husband first, and then the death of her son. When Mary was a teenager engaged to an older man named Joseph, the angel Gabriel announced to her that she had been chosen by God to give birth to the promised Messiah. Mary responded with simple faith, accepting the privileged role, despite the fact that her pregnancy would seem to Joseph to mark unfaithfulness and might mark her as a harlot in her community. God guarded Mary's reputation and sent the angel to speak to Joseph.

(Women of the Bible, Thomas Nelson Inc, c2003, p. 126)

During the thirty years Jesus lived with his family and carried on Joseph's trade, Mary and Joseph provided a home and a number of brothers and sisters for Jesus. While Mary had confidence in her oldest Son, when Jesus began his public ministry, Mary and the rest of her family were puzzled and uncertain.

Mary had never thought of herself as special. She would not have used words like "highly favored" and "blessed...among women" to describe herself. Mary was humble like Moses. Mary simply saw herself as a person who loved God and who was privileged to serve God, her Creator. (128)

Mary asked questions. Mary's simple faith and readiness to do God's will without thought of herself stands as a testimony to her faith. She could not see what lie ahead, neither can we.

Joseph died before Mary and probably before Jesus began his public ministry. What a loss to her. Joseph was sensitive and fair. Joseph was also a man of faith. When an angel told Joseph that Mary had not been unfaithful,

Joseph listened and went ahead with the wedding. (130). To me this seems like a true soul mate.

I interject here the wisdom of life from Ecclesiastes chapter 7. It is better to spend your time at funerals than at festivals. For you are going to die, and you should think about it while there is still time (7:2). A wise person thinks much about death, while the fool thinks only about having a good time now (7:4). The Teacher goes on to say: Enjoy prosperity while you can. But when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. That way you will realize that nothing is certain in this life (7:14). There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven.

People cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end (3:11b). Wisdom from the Teacher indicates needing balance in all of life.

Despite the early evidence that Jesus was indeed special, the Gospels suggest that Jesus grew up a "normal" child so that even Mary's vision of his identity was clouded.

While the apocryphal books tell imaginative tales of miracles supposedly performed by Jesus as a child, the Scriptures draw a curtain across Jesus' childhood years. While Jesus was aware of his identity and mission, Mary seemed unaware. That Jesus was so normal a child in her large family must have led Mary to treat Jesus with the same love and discipline as her other sons and daughters.

At the time that opposition to Jesus is high and he is causing controversy, the family delegation comes together to question Jesus and to counsel him because he is stirring up the countryside. They had come to try to calm Jesus—to urge him to be less controversial! And in this I would say, save his life! Surely they had some thoughts like in Ecclesiastes futility of wisdom.

"Everything under the noon day sun is meaningless, like chasing the wind. What is wrong cannot be righted" (Ec1.14,15a).

Mary waits to see how God's purpose in Jesus would unfold. Mary stands near the cross with women friends and John the disciple. We cannot imagine Mary's pain during those bitter hours.

Jesus arranges for John to take care of his mother before he dies. Mary held a special place in his heart. (133)

Only after Jesus' death and resurrection did the family finally understand that the son and brother who had lived among them was indeed God incarnate. Then, and only then, did all become clear, and Jesus' earthly

family worshipped him. (134) This seems to me to be verse 6, a time to search and a time to lose.

Ecclesiastes speaks of eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die. Quite possibly no other Bible person but Mary so clearly displays the truth of Augustine's observation: love God, and do as you please. Mary did love God, and what pleased her was to do God's will. (134)

At the same time, Mary was human. Mary's days were filled with the typical tasks of first-century housewives: grinding grain, cooking meals, weaving cloth, directing her children's activities, and talking with her husband. In this, she was indistinguishable from other women in her village. She was undoubtedly known as warm and friendly, a good friend and a caring person. Even Jesus seemed no different than others during those years. (134)

In the end, after Jesus rose and his identity as God's Son was no longer in any doubt, Mary took her place with the others who believed in him. (134)

Mary's life reveals meditative wisdom, wisdom rooted in the things of God and righteousness. Mary did not know God's whole plan all at once, neither do we. There are special incidents that we may not fully understand, but, like Mary, we should store them in our hearts until God provides further insights. (135)

A time to plant and a time to harvest.

Many of you are gardeners. What a gift that we can use our land to plant, grow and harvest vegetables. We are in the midst of enjoying fresh fruits and vegetables.

It is a good thing to know where our food comes from and to give thanks to God for these good gifts of nourishment.

A time to tear down and a time to rebuild.

Homes, schools and businesses are sometimes knocked down by storms, natural disasters and military destruction. Thank you to our MYF and adults who went on the MDS trip and helped people rebuild their homes.

There are other forms of tearing down and rebuilding. When I was a child on the farm in northern Illinois, we had a corn crib. For those of you who are not familiar with what a corn crib is, I will explain a bit. The crib was a long rectangle structure with two sections and an open space down the middle to drive a tractor and wagon. Each crib side was built of lumber with spaces between the boards for air circulation for the ears of corn that were

stored. The building had a gable roof. This crib was functional when my dad picked ear corn with a picker pulled by the tractor and then a tractor mounted corn picker. The ears of corn were hauled in a wagon and emptied into the crib.

The corn then needed to be shelled before feeding it to the animals or grinding it for food for the animals.

When my dad wanted to move to harvesting with a combine that shells the corn and shoots the corn into the wagons, he needed a different structure for storing the shelled corn. The old crib was torn down and replaced with gray bins that you see now on farms. The shelled corn was dried in the bin and ready to feed to the animals or sell to the farm co-op for other farmers to purchase.

Not only are buildings destroyed or torn down but lives are often damaged, injured and torn down. Many war veterans return to our country needing to face surgeries and rigid therapy in order to rebuild their bodies as much as possible. Also, lives are torn apart by natural disaster and accidents.

When I worked for Oakwood Foundation in 1999-2002, we hosted Joni and Friends family retreats at Oakwood Park in Syracuse, Indiana. Joni could not attend all retreats but she did come to the two separate weeks of retreat each summer at Oakwood.

For those of you who do not know Joni Eareckson Tada, she is founder and CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center. She is one year younger than I.

Joni is an author, artist, singer, radio personality, and advocate for the disabled. She is married to Ken. As a teenager, Joni enjoyed riding horses, hiking, tennis and swimming.

When Joni was 17 she dove into the Chesapeake Bay after misjudging the shallowness of the water. She suffered a fracture between the fourth and fifth cervical levels and became a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the shoulders down.

During her two years of rehabilitation, according to her autobiography, she experienced anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, and religious doubts. However, Joni learned to paint with a brush between her teeth, and began selling her artwork. She has written many books and recorded music and appeared on TV over and over. She developed a ministry that includes repair of wheelchairs and shipping them to children and adults in other countries

where they have need for wheelchairs. (online biography of Joni and my knowledge of her work)

Not everyone has the notoriety of Joni, however, she is an inspiration to me and others to do our best and overcome whatever we need to overcome. As a young person ready for college, I heard about Joni. A dream of mine was to meet her some day. It was such a delight to be able to be with her and listen to her sing at the retreats. Her ability to look beyond herself to the needs of others is remarkable. She is a person who was torn down accidentally, and she chose to work hard to rebuild her body and her life so that she could help others in need.

How have you been torn down? Maybe by bullying, divorce, loss of a job, death of a loved one or dear friend, injury, mistreatment because of the color of your skin, mistreatment because you are gay or lesbian, failure or other personal loss. May the hope, mercy and love of God be poured out to you. Rebuilding after a significant loss is slow and painful. Everyone in this room is beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Claim the unconditional love of God as an inward source of strength.

A time to cry and a time to laugh

Tears of joy and tears of sorrow. Two weeks ago friends in our community remembered Luis Francisco, known as Alex Martinez., who died in an accident. What a loss.

Armand and I faced the death of his sister on Feb 23. In these times of heartache you and I know the mix of sorrow and laughter. For those who died, they loved to smile and laugh so we, too, can move forward with hope.

A time to tear and a time to mend.

Last August an art project had the Andy Warhol bridge in Pittsburgh draped with 600 colorful blankets and quilts all knitted and crocheted by hand. It was a celebration of diversity and the blankets went to those in need. The project began with a small idea, a person who was knitting as she recovered from an illness. It then grew into a bigger community project.

Huge projects or an international non-profit are not the point of Ecc; instead, the point is that we live according to God's instructions and be open to learning along the journey.

Lastly, a time for war and a time for peace.

This past week we have heard much about death and violence. We must do all we can locally and globally to promote peace. Showing unconditional love and generosity to others provides the climate and setting for hospitality and peace.

Mother Teresa wrote in In My Own Words, “We all have a duty to work for peace. But in order to achieve peace, we should learn from Jesus to be meek and humble of heart. Only humility will lead us to unity, and unity will lead to peace.”

Prayer.