

## What Time Is It?!?

**Romans 8:18-28    Eccl.3:1-14**

I don't know about you, but I get motion sickness pretty easily. Our kids want me to go on these crazy rides at amusement parks—I tried that once and it didn't end well. There is an *emotional* rollercoaster many people are riding these days, with everything going on in the world, and in our country. In this long haul that we're in—and that we're in for—some days we're feeling good, enjoying summer, and are optimistic about what's ahead. Other days we may find ourselves short-tempered or perhaps collapsing into a pile of angst, or confusion.

Grocery store: I saw someone yelling at a grocery store employee because this person couldn't find the particular flavor of a diet soda they were looking for. It's petty. It seems like some people are losing their humanity.

Then I think, I was super impatient with the driver in front of me one morning on my way here last week, driving super slowly and like they didn't know where they were going. I had to laugh at myself: it's not like I'm in a hurry.

What's up with that?

What's up is, there's a lot going on. Some of us feel it more than others, but the uncertainty, political rancor, climate change, among other things, have

notched up our corporate anxiety. Not to mention the Mariners, and are they going to make the playoffs or will they just do what they do every year and make us excited for the Seahawks season to start!

And in a time like this, we need perspective. And grace. Lots of grace. We each *need* grace, and we need to *give* grace—to our neighbors and fellow grocery store shoppers and employees and drivers on the road in front of us. And it helps to have a larger perspective which, hopefully, can give us the patience, not just so we can survive, but to even thrive during this time, as God slowly works out the new thing that God is doing in the world.

And so, this morning, in addition to that wonderful reading from Romans 8, we're going to find perspective from a well-known passage in one of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, the book of Ecclesiastes. Even before I was a Christian or ever set foot in a church, I knew this passage—and so did you probably —because it was recited and sung and talked about so widely in popular culture.

And I want us to do a little wrestling this morning with Solomon's words, because they aren't just good song lyrics or beautiful poetry; they are words that resonate with the human spirit as we grapple with some of life's struggles and

questions, especially these days—during this “season” of change and tumult. And so, both from Romans, and now from Ecclesiastes—we hear Paul, and now Solomon, speak wisdom to us—not to give us easy answers, but to help us sit with the questions and struggles in a faithful way, and with hope (my theme here...).

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-14** <sup>1</sup>For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: <sup>2</sup>a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; <sup>3</sup>a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; <sup>4</sup>a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; <sup>5</sup>a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; <sup>6</sup>a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; <sup>7</sup>a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; <sup>8</sup>a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. <sup>9</sup>What gain have the workers from their toil? <sup>10</sup>I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

<sup>11</sup>He has made everything suitable for its time (“beautiful in his time” in most translations); moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. <sup>12</sup>I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup>moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. <sup>14</sup>I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

This is the word of the Lord!

What caught your attention in these readings? Was there a word or phrase that stood out to you? That spoke to you? Maybe a song or two came to mind?

For me, this time, it was Ecclesiastes 3:11: God makes everything suitable for its time (how we normally read this verse: “God makes all things beautiful in his time...”). Thanks, David, for the prelude, a song with that title.

The NRSV (our chair Bible, the one I am using) translates this as “*suitable for its time*” which is a very good translation—a better translation, actually. Because the word “beautiful” in Hebrew means suitable; just right, everything as it is supposed to be. This isn’t beauty as we typically define it. The word here conveys more of a sense of all things fitting together, as they’re supposed to be. Like Romans 8:28, which says, “All things work together for good...” Romans 8:28 could almost be read as, “God makes everything suitable in its time,” or ‘in God’s time.’

The idea is that God makes everything “just right” in his time; God makes everything well and right *in its time, at the right time*. And that may take a long time, sometimes! It’s the “in God’s time” part that is hard for us.

Think of all of the “times and seasons” of our lives. Solomon mentions some of the obvious ones from our lives, like birth and death, mourning and laughing, planting and harvesting. All of us have experienced some of those at times in our lives. If we go down the list, we can check them off...

And we could add to those from Ecclesiastes, more specific times and seasons from our modern lives: graduations, and weddings; times and seasons of changes in employment, and eventually retirement; times of good health, and of ill health; times and seasons of stress, and times of peacefulness and rest; times of inward reflection and times of outward action.

And, of course, there are the seasons of the year (winter, spring, summer, fall) which teach us that God makes everything beautiful (suitable, or, just right), in its time in the earth's creative renewal of itself throughout the year.

And Solomon confesses—perhaps with a hint of futility or maybe frustration (which is a theme of the entire book, by the way. Remember how the book of Ecclesiastes begins; the very opening lines are: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” That is, literally in the Hebrew language, everything is a passing mist/vapor; or, to put it in Pacific Northwest terms, “fog.” So, he's writing with some sense of futility, or frustration)—in our passage this morning he confesses that often times it's tough to figure out what God is up to from beginning to end, and that can be frustrating. He's saying, in his own way, that sometimes the basic stance of life and faith is: “I dunno...” That's all we can say sometimes: I dunno! Eugene Peterson in the Message: “I can't tell if God is coming or going.”

I think I've told you the story about our son Ben, who is now 26, when he was about 4 years old, when he didn't know the answer to a question, or was confused or frustrated, would say, "I have no heck. I have no heck what's going on." This was his version of the more colorful way his parents expressed their confusion or frustration!

In this passage, as in the rest of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is saying, "We have no heck what God is doing" sometimes. From beginning to end. God has put a sense of the past and of the future in our hearts, which muddles things up sometimes. And therefore, we have no heck what God is up to. Anybody feel that way right now?? In this 'season' of life? Of the world?

Solomon is raising a big question for us (the entire book of Ecclesiastes raises it for us, as does all of the wisdom literature of the Bible). It's a question that poets, and philosophers, and fellow pilgrims on the journey of faith have asked through the centuries. The question is: how do we make sense of the seasons of life? How do we make sense of the appointed times (which is what "seasons" really means)? Especially when those times and seasons are roller-coaster-ish.

How do we make sense of what's going on in our country, and in the world? With everything that's going on, many people feel like they have no heck what's going on or what God is up to, whether globally or personally.

To put this theologically and Biblically, how is God's will, God's goodness, God's faithfulness, relevant to us throughout the seasons of our lives, and especially now in our life together as a nation, and as people of the world, or as the Bible puts it, of the nations? How is there a 'just-rightness' to this time and season? Or... *when* will there be a just-rightness to it? Because it doesn't feel just right, right now. Another way to put it is: what time is it, really? I remember the meme that went around social media during covid shutdown, when we were all sheltering in place; it said: "For those of you who have lost track of what day it is, today is Blursday." Some days it still feels like that!

Solomon himself did not come up with any answers or quick fixes to the questions about what, when, why and how of the times and seasons, and what God is doing. And in a way, thank God for that. Because there aren't easy answers to many of life's hard questions. Now, Solomon does acknowledge that God always has the last word (amen to that!), and he acknowledges that God's good work endures (amen to that too)—we can't add to it or take anything away

from it. Yet in attempting to figure out what God is doing in between, we don't have easy answers.

What we *do* have, are yearnings and invitations. Yearnings and invitations. There is a **yearning** for resolution. The passage from Romans 8 speaks to this yearning, this longing for resolution and redemption. And as in Romans 8, Solomon affirms that when the time is right, things will begin to make sense. God will work all things together for good—or, *God is already* working things together for good, but we just can't see it yet. So, while we wait for those yearnings to begin to make sense or become resolved, we have an **invitation**. Or, to put it in the words of a 4-year-old, when we have no heck what God is up to, we have an invitation from God:

The invitation is to learn to trust God *in the midst of life's creative tensions*.  
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We notice in this famous litany of Ecclesiastes 3—a time for this, and a time for that—that on one side there is a list of things that appeal to us and sound delightful and enjoyable; and on the other side is a list of things that aren't so appealing or enjoyable. On one side, there is joy and clarity; on the other side is vulnerability and disruption. And we so often try to push our lives into the bright side of things, or we expect that's where we're supposed to live all the time. And



if life isn't just right, right now, we begin to think there is either something wrong with me, or with the world, or with God. God isn't doing God's job. Or, I've messed up somehow and that's why things aren't right.

But I'd like us to wonder: is it possible that God designed life in such a way that there is a creativity that exists *between* the two, in the creative tension—between light and dark, between good and bad, between joy and suffering? Where the goal isn't to always land on the positive side of the ledger, but to learn to live with, and trust God in, the tension, and even the ambiguity that exists between the two sides. And let God be God in the midst of them, and let God resolve things in due time. To put it another way, *what if God's desire for us is to learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable*. Not all the time, but in the times when we find ourselves in-between. To learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Because if we're honest with ourselves, life isn't just a bouncing back and forth between the two (where the magnetic pull is always supposed to be toward the bright side), but where both of these sometimes exist simultaneously: birth *and* death, building up *and* tearing down, finding *and* losing, keeping *and* throwing away, and so forth. It's in the both-and of creative tensions that God

moves and acts and stretches us and grows us, and makes us wise, and calls us to have hope.

Both are happening now all around us! Hard and even destructive things, and wonderful and life-giving things (which are the seeds of what's to come). One of the blessings that the visioning task force has discovered is how much great work is being done in our communities to help people amidst difficult circumstances. Dozens and dozens of organizations with hundreds of people involved. For example, more and more people are struggling with mental health and addiction issues AND more and more people and organizations are mobilizing to help. It's both-and. Same with climate issues, and so forth. And God is at work in the tension of the both-and, bringing hope.

We're living right smack in the middle of a time of tension, aren't we? And it can be a *creative* tension if we're willing to engage it and trust God with doing a new thing, and not just pass the time waiting for things to get better or try go back to what they used to be. Because they aren't going back to what they used to be. Things won't be the same. Things are going to be different. Covid was the big splash of cold water in our face to make us aware of that. And we have the opportunity, now, to prepare, and to live into the new thing God is doing. And—to bring in some indigenous wisdom here—to make decisions based on how they

impact the next 7 generations. We have to think and act that way. To stop thinking and acting in ways that are only beneficial for us now, but to ask “How will this impact and benefit the next 7 generations?” We need indigenous wisdom like this more than ever! Metaphorically speaking, are we willing to plant trees that we will never sit under?

And I am hopeful that in the midst of the creative tensions in our world right now will come a new path forward—new ideas, stronger communities, people choosing to live more simply and slowly, and better ways of resolving our differences. It may take us a while to get there, but I have hope.

And in the midst of all of this we are invited to trust—to trust God in the midst of creative tensions. I love Paul’s affirmation in Romans that when we’re yearning and struggling (we don’t know what God is doing from beginning to end), and especially when we don’t have words to say, that the Spirit prays in us, and intercedes for us. The Spirit prays in us, and intercedes for us, according to God’s will. Just sit with that, and ponder that for a while! We are invited to trust, simply, and be in awe of the fact that the Spirit of God is speaking in our hearts, beyond words. Is that cool or what?!? Take it on faith!

Paul doesn’t have any easy answers either—but he calls us to have hope, and exercise that hope. He even goes so far as to say, “In hope we are saved.”

That's a bold statement. Ponder that one for a while too! In hope we are saved. What he means is, if we cave in to despair, we will wither. But if we look to God to work all things together, to make everything suitable in its time and in God's time, it will save us. Because we will have eyes to see the movements of God in our lives, in our communities, and in the world. Even if we can't see the big picture right now, we can trust God with the big picture.

We are invited to trust God in the midst of creative tensions. And trusting God always requires patience. As it speaks of in Romans. We wait, we hope, with patience. Or, as it's often translated in the older versions of the Bible, with "longsuffering." And our patience is going to require some longsuffering in the foreseeable future. Not misery! But an ability to trust God with the bigger picture, and the just-rightness of what is coming.

We live in an instant society—we are accustomed to getting things quickly. For example, we are accustomed to our digital devices getting information to us rapidly. Google will tell you that it took them only .09 seconds to come up with a list of 9,670,000 items that match whatever you typed into their search engine. Speed is the name of the game. (Btw, that's what I did for "Town and Country Market in Shoreline" a couple days ago when I wanted to know what time they

open; Google told me it took .09 seconds to come up with 9,670,000 results).

Speed is the name of the game, and we live at speed in our instant culture.

But the reality is, we don't have an instant God. As the Bible often conveys to us, God is never in a hurry. God doesn't live at speed. And good things—God-things—often come slowly, and take time. We don't have an *instant* God. We **do** have a *faithful* God. A *present-to-us* God. Who invites us to likewise live in the present, in the now, where God is present to us in the midst of the creative tensions.

Where, we are told, we find joy. Because when we can try to live in the present, live in the now, we find God, the great I AM, this present-tense verb name for God, which signifies God's consistent presence with us in the now. And in God's presence is fullness of joy as David says a few times in the Psalms.

The calling and invitation is to try to live in the present, as an expression of trusting God and exercising patience. It's probably one of the hardest things for us humans to do. Partly because when we're in the midst of life's tensions, questions, and struggles—when we are invited to trust—we are tempted to go for quick fix solutions to ease our anxiety. And perhaps in our minds the solution is to go back, whether it's nostalgia for the past, or for what we perceived as better

days, or just mentally we go back as a way of soothing ourselves. Or sometimes we go the other direction and worry about the future and all the what-ifs.

This is where Jesus, our great wisdom teacher, teaches us, first, about the past, when he says, “No one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom.” In other words, God is not in the past. God is now. Life is not in the past; life is now.

With regard to the future, Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow has enough troubles of its own. Live today.” That’s where God is.

It’s all easier said than done, but worth the effort. Trusting God as God makes everything beautiful, everything just right, in its time.

New lyrics to a familiar beloved tune: God of Creation, All Powerful