

What Time Is It?!?

Romans 8:18-28 Eccl.3:1-14

I've noticed something lately, and I wonder if you've noticed it too, or have experienced it yourself. It seems that there is an emotional rollercoaster many people are riding these days. In this long haul that we're in—and that we're in for—some days we're feeling great, and enjoying the break in the routine and being at home. Other days we find ourselves short-tempered or maybe collapsing into a pit of despair.

Grocery store: I saw a couple yelling at a grocery store employee because they couldn't find the particular brand of a product 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 this morning on my way here, driving super slow 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—to get to the empty church on time to preach a sermon with no one else here. What's up with that?

What's up is, there's a lot going on. Some of us can feel the stress of the entire country, perhaps the world. Not just the sadness of sickness and death,

but the economic anxiety, and now the political rancor that has returned as a way of reminding us that it's an election year.

And in a time like this, we need perspective. We each *need* grace, and we need to *give* grace, to others, 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 (“longsuffering”, or, to be ‘long-tempered’) not just so we can survive, but to thrive during this time, as God slowly works out the new thing he is doing in the world.

And so, this morning we're looking at a well-known passage in one of the least understood 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 said 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 coronavirus and sheltering in place and economic struggle and all of it coinciding with an election

year. There *is* a lot going on, and we're feeling it. And so we come to a couple passages—first from Romans, then from Ecclesiastes—that I hope can speak wisdom to us—not to give us easy answers, but to help us sit with the questions and struggles in a faithful way.

As I read each of these, listen for a word or phrase that speaks to you.

Romans 8:¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Ecclesiastes 3: ¹For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to

refrain from embracing; ⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ⁹What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time (“beautiful” 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. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴I 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 beautiful in his time (that’s how we normally read this verse, and that is the way it’s sung in the song from our order of worship: “in his time... God makes all things beautiful in his time...”).

The NRSV (our chair Bible, the one I am using) translates this as “suitable for its time” which is a very good translation. 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, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28 could almost be read as, "God makes everything suitable in its time," or 'in his time.' 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. We'll come back to this. Hold that thought for a moment.

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 plucking up. Almost all of us are experiencing some of those right now, aren't we? If we go down the list, we can check them off: birth and death (some of you are celebrating grandchildren, great grandchildren being born; and on the other side of the ledger, our long time next door neighbor passed away last week; Ben's roommate's dad died from covid 19 in New Jersey; his mom, a nurse, still recovering), planting and plucking up (gardening); keeping and throwing away—a lot of closets and garages are being cleaned out these days!

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 of 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. As I've been saying, thank God it's spring right now! I have a new appreciation for the beauty and spectacle of spring in western Washington.

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, everything is a passing mist/vapor; 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 22, when he was about 4 years old, when he was confused or frustrated, used to say, "I have no heck what's going on. I have no heck what's happening." 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?

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 faith journey have asked through the centuries. The question is: how do we make sense of the seasons of our lives? How do we make sense of the appointed times (which is what "seasons" really means)?

We could even ask this as a nation right now, or as a world. 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, 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 love the meme that's been going around social media: "For those of you who have lost track of what day it is, today is Blursday, the Fortyeighteenth of Mayprilay." I resonate with that! I missed a phone appointment with someone last week because I forgot what day it is!)

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 some 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 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*.

To learn to trust God in the midst of creative tensions.

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 suffering. 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 something wrong with

me, or with the world, or with God. God isn't doing God's job. Or, I've screwed 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—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.

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 creative tensions of our lives that God moves and acts and stretches us and grows us, and makes us wise, and calls us to have 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 reopen and go back to what they used to be. Because they aren't going to be what they used to be. Things won't be the same. Even when our governor says we can go back out and go back to work, things will have changed. It will be different. And we have the opportunity right now to prepare for it, to live into the new thing God is doing.

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?!?

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 his 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 .38 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 “Central Market in

Shoreline” a couple days ago when I wanted to know what time they open; Google told me it took .38 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, paradoxically, 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 his 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 we want to go back, whether it’s nostalgia for the past, or for what we perceived as better days,

also as a way of soothing ourselves. Or sometimes we go the other direction and worry about the future and all the what-if's.

This is where Jesus, our great wisdom teacher, tells us, "Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow has enough troubles of its own. Stay focused on today." That's where God is. It's easier said than done, but worth the effort. Trusting God as God makes everything beautiful, just right, in his time.

While going for a walk in our neighborhood one sunny day, I noticed a few doors down from us that a bunch of neighborhood kids had been having fun drawing on our sidewalk using sidewalk chalk. Apparently the word has gotten out to the children of the world to do this, to spread some encouragement to worried adults. We have a lot to learn from the children! Teachers are being amazing in teaching kids online right now. And children are being amazing too, and they can also be our teachers. And so I've shared a couple pictures that I took: "We got this." And, "Make today amazing."

Please pray with me:

Gracious God, we think back to Christmas, when the announcement of your birth is that you are Emmanuel, God with us. We affirm that now in this Easter season,

as we celebrate the risen Christ with us. Thank you that your Spirit prays in us, with us, for us. Encourage our hearts, and give us eyes to see you—in the small and ordinary, and in the big and extraordinary. And in all things, help us to trust you more, and therefore become people of hope. Through Christ our risen Lord. Amen.