

“Time Redeemed”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Galatians 4:4-7
January 1, 2012

It is rare that we have Christmas on a Sunday and New Year’s on a Sunday. I did a little calculating about time this week and discovered (and some of this is because of Leap Years) that the next time this will occur is in 2016 and then 2022 and then 2033. Well, maybe only a minister thinks about such calculations of time on New Year’s Day.

Normally the Sunday after Christmas, we take a Sunday in the season of Christmas to slow down a bit after the thronging crowds on Christmas Eve to ponder the mystery of the incarnation, but this year we have the Sunday after Christmas fall on New Year’s. We can easily make the connection of New Year’s and Christmas because so often our Christmas texts in the New Testament refer to time. Paul says in our scripture reading from Galatians, “In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law.” John in his great prologue that introduces his gospel refers to time, or at least someone outside of time who comes into time, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....” Or the writer of Hebrews puts it this way, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.”

Last night was New Year’s Eve. I am not sure whether that is really exciting for all of you and whether you really do it up fairly big. I guess New Year’s Eve is OK. Our family has been getting together with a couple of my seminary cronies and their families for many years and we have a good time. One custom that is rather strange that one of good friend’s of my wife has contributed to the occasion (which I think comes from Laura’s background in Iowa) is that we raid the cupboard under the sink for pans and bang them with soup spoons out on the front stoop at midnight. I wasn’t sure what to tell Bill, our calling pastor who organizes the Sunrise Saints, about cooking pancakes for the breakfast this morning because I might be frolicking rather late into the night banging pans. I don’t think he would believe my explanation.

Which is a rather way of saying without being too much of a Scrooge that New Year’s Eve is OK, as far as it goes. Helmut Thielliche the German pastor theologian says that New Year’s parties and all the partying and festivity are a way of covering up the fact that another year has passed and that we are all a year older. Time that goes from year to year is a rather depressing thing to consider, because it means that someday we are going to die. Time reminds us that we are finite and that we will not live forever.

Maybe that gets us to the heart of our Old Testament reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 3. We don’t read Ecclesiastes very much in the three year cycle of public readings of scripture; this chapter each year on New Year’s and one other time in the course of three years. Chapter 3 is probably the most familiar words of this book of the Bible:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
To time to be born, and a time to die...”

I can remember back in the 1960’s that various pop music artist took these words from the Bible and sung them—Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie, Peter, Paul and Mary, and others. I can remember as a kid that I loved them singing these words, even if at the time I didn’t

know that the words came from the Bible. The singing of the words was upbeat, poetic, and hopeful, at least as I remember it as an early adolescent.

But the words from Ecclesiastes chapter 3, while probably the best known of Ecclesiastes' words and maybe on the part of a more secular audience some of the most well known words of the Bible, but when examined with a critical eye, one wonders why the words are so well known. Cut through the poetry, the author of the book, called Qohleth or the preacher is saying there is a time for this, and a time for that. We get up in the morning and go to work. We build, we lose; we laugh, we cry. But in the end it doesn't add up to very much. We might put it this way today, we go to school to learn so we can get a job, and then get a family, and then enjoy some of the pleasures of life, so that the kids grow up, and you get older, and then end up in a retirement village, before you are put in a box and you die. Or as Ecclesiastes puts it else where, "What gain have the workers from their toil?" In other words, what is the point of life and the passage of time?

Iaian Provin puts it this way: 'The individual items in the poem are not important, but the elements taken together as an overall description of life. It is not each individual life that is in view—not every person for example will kill or experience war. Still less are any aspects of human life mentioned here commended. There is no prescriptive aspect to the list. It is simply generalized, descriptive account of the kinds of things that make up human existence as it can be observed.' (p. 89 NIV, Application Commentary)

In other words, Ecclesiastes is not prescribing what our life should be, but what it actually is. There are times in our lives when we feel like Ecclesiastes. We get up and go to work or go study. We come home. We sleep. We get up the next morning and get dressed and go through the same thing all over again. And then one week leads to another week which turns into another month and then another year, and so it goes; time marches on. And in the end it all adds up to nothing.

Ecclesiastes does say some amazing things in this book that would surprise us that it is even in the Bible; and since we don't get to this book very often, we should at least visit some of the passages:

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The Hebrew word is *hebel* which means vapor or mist. Maybe it should be translated "Futility of futility, all is futility." Or Meaningless of Meaninglessness, all is meaningless." In the Bible?

Or as Ecclesiastes goes on to say in our scripture text in chapter 3, God has put a sense of past and future in the human mind (that is what distinguishes us from the animals) yet we cannot really figure out what God means by the whole. (3:11)

Or in chapter 2, Ecclesiastes acting as one of the kings of Israel (perhaps Solomon) tries pleasure and then gigantic building projects in Jerusalem or tries practicing wisdom, but finds in the end that this does not bring fulfillment in life.

Or how about some of these sayings?

"And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive." (4:2)

“For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun.” (4:12)

Or these words, “For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals.” (3:19)

Some of the rabbis in Old Testament days were so put off by the skepticism of the book that they did not think that it belonged in the Bible. Derek Kidner suggests the reason that it was included: It is as kind of John the Baptist sort of book in which we all take a bath. We are reminded of the false foundations that we build life, and the preacher destroys these illusions in order to build on a more lasting foundation. (Introduction to his commentary, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*)

In fact, when I served in Japan, I used Ecclesiastes as the introductory book for the study of the Bible. It sort of fit into the Buddhist mindset, as they used to say, “so it goes.” Ecclesiastes helped to make a point of contact with Japanese students that could then perhaps gain a hearing for the gospel. Ecclesiastes creates questions or keeps us from living with illusions about life, so that answers can be given to us. This is the value of the book, and why in the end by God’s grace and wisdom was included in the Bible.

More recent interpretations of the Book of Ecclesiastes have questioned whether the skepticism of Ecclesiastes which many moderns have concluded border on atheism is really valid and accurate. We should not forget that after the preacher has a searing criticism of our illusions and shaky foundations for life that he over and over again commends, “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (2:24) The book ends with the preacher counseling, “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the year draw near....The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments.”

Some have thought that Ecclesiastes has some strange disconnect or that maybe some editor has cleaned up his skepticism. No, I don’t think so. To be sure Ecclesiastes is not the final word and as we shall see in a moment, God’s coming in time changes much. But while Ecclesiastes cannot figure out life from within time and our own human techniques and that we are finite, then at least we are ready to consider God: “The universe we inhabit comes from his hand and comes to us as a gift. Our lives are a gift, offered for a short time period and then taken back once again. Embrace life for what it is, rather than what you would like it to be. Live it out before God. This is the pathway in which joy lies, even though puzzlement and pain will be found there, and there are never guarantees how it will turn out.” (Iaian Provin, p. 41)

Time and New Year’s may be rather depressing just going through the motions and the cycle of life, the same thing year after year, only you are a little older. Maybe last night you did pretty much the same thing you always do for New Year’s, and maybe today on New Year’s you will do pretty much the same thing you did as last year. And maybe the coming year you will follow pretty much the same schedule. There is a time for everything....And yet Ecclesiastes, even in his time could not understand everything

about the ways of God, and he is preparing us for the good news of God, the one who is outside and the creator of time, coming in time. *“In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children of God.”*

Something was happening in the centuries before the birth of Christ. The Romans were building roads; Greek had become the international language; and the Jews had been prepared for centuries for the coming of the messiah. It wasn't just that time was repeating itself, but history was going somewhere and culminating in the coming of Christ, God's Son. In the Jewish and the Christian understanding (and this is quite different from the eastern religions) time is not just cyclical, but it is moving and going somewhere; there is history. But Jesus Christ did not just come naturally from within time, but God sent forth his Son and came into the midst of our time, so that our time could be redeemed.

I believe that the gift of God's Son does not mean that we just go through the motions of another year. I believe that God not only makes us his children, but there are gracious moments when God intervenes. God steps into our time, disrupts us, shakes us up, and redirects us into something wonderful, some new course, growth, and spiritual transformation.

There are times when your life stood at a dead end with a closed door. God entered. God knocked and you had a future offered to you that you could not have had on your own.

One story as an example: My son a year ago lost a job, and as his father I wasn't very happy about the way he was treated by the employer. For awhile he was quite depressed. But the difficulties and routine of life had a way of making him consider whether God wanted him to move into some new directions that he would not have considered. He got a job which led to another job, a new area of the country to live, and a new special relationship. God has had a way of redeeming his time.

One of the things that we do in the life of our church here at Third Church is that we mark time not by the secular calendar of Mother's Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, or even New Year's, but by the sacred calendar of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. We are developing the eyes of faith to see that God comes in and redeems our time as we are adopted as children of God.

I am suggesting this year that our congregation take seriously the daily reading of scripture and we have a plan of daily readings around the lectionary in the Gathering Space this morning, so that we understand time not just as clock time, or passing time, but God coming into time, and redeeming time.

Our primary task in this New Year is not trying to fix everything that was wrong with the old year in the new year. Christmas in the New Year means that God comes to us, continues to work with us, and continues to transform our often frustrating and disappointing human time into God's redeemed time. The communion table before us on this first Sunday of the New Year, the first Sunday of Christmas is to remind us that God has come into our time in the birth of his son, and redeems our human time into God's time. Amen.

Germinating Idea or the Sermon: William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, January, February, March 2011. He works with pairing the Revelation text to Ecclesiastes, but I believe the Christmas lection text from Galatians is more helpful in connecting New Year's and Christmas.

Willimon also uses Ecclesiastes in an entirely negative way, while I think that Ecclesiastes can be interpreted much more in the mainstream of the Hebrew tradition. Eugene Peterson makes these corrections in his book, *Five Smooth Stones*.