

“Seasons of the Spirit”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

July 30, 2006

“There is a time for all seasons”, the writer of Ecclesiastes remarks. Indeed there is. Life is filled with seasons, with changing times, and with changing fortunes.

Today we focus on one of the most unique windows at the United Church--the “Living Windows”. Many persons have worked on these windows which have exchangeable panels so that the window can reflect the changing seasons of the year. Among those who worked on this window were Bob Brownlee, Rusty Gray, Glenn Rigg, Karen Leach, Betty and Roger Smith and others. These changeable windows highlight the fact that life changes and every once in awhile we will need a “new” expression of faith. Here that expression will be welcomed. This window was given by Shirley Davis in memory of her parents and brother, and by Kitty Russell in memory of her husband, John. The window was dedicated on August 9, 1992.

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According to William P. Brown in his commentary on Ecclesiastes¹ this is one of the strangest books in the Bible. Yet, according to Brown its “anguished message is almost as old as literary history itself.”²

Ecclesiastes was most likely produced during a period, to quote Brown, “of cultural malaise that gripped much of the ancient world beginning with the

¹ Brown, William P, Ecclesiastes, Interpretation Series, (John Knox Press, 2000).

² Brown, p. 1.

Persian period.”³ What happened in this period that was so discouraging and depressing? Brown comments that this was a period in which dramatic changes were occurring in Israel. The economy moved from basically agrarian to commercial. A standardized currency was introduced into the area and along with that a system of taxation.⁴ The new economy played havoc with lives as a person could be successful one day and in poverty the next.⁵

The main character in the book is Qoheleth who travels around lamenting the state of life and attempting to find some meaning within life. He not only laments the economic conditions but explores realistic perspectives in regard to life itself.⁶

The struggle of the book resonates with every age---it is truly a book for all seasons. In understanding the book Brown asserts that we almost have to take it in its entirety. For instance, in chapter 4 the sage laments that “the dead are more fortunate than the living”.⁷ Later the sage comments that “a living dog is better off than a dead lion.”⁸ So which is it?----The book seems filled with contradictions because life is filled with contradictions. It is the living of life that is the value and growing from the lessons that life teaches.

Here in the Third Chapter Qoheleth puts forth a thesis---life has many seasons---and then proceeds to list some of these. His poetry contrasts opposites but makes the point that the desirable things have their place along

³ Brown, p.7.

⁴ Brown, p.9.

⁵ Brown, p.9.

⁶ Brown, William, Ecclesiastes, Interpretation Series, p.10.

⁷ Brown, p.17

⁸ Brown p.17, reference from 9:4.

side the less desirable things. As a sage he observes and reports. The cosmos operates like a pendulum swinging back and forth. It is as it is.⁹

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Last week our office received a phone call from the hospital. We were asked by a family to visit and pray with a 97 year old person who was at the end of her life. I went to the hospital, visited with the family and prayed for a peaceful transition through death. Interestingly the daughter-in-law quoted Ecclesiastes saying that there is “a time for all things” and this is the time for Sue, her mother-in-law to pass on.

Each season of life brings with it possibilities and disappointments, successes and failures, hope and despair. Depending on whether we focus on the positive or negative most of us could tell stories about each stage of life--- each season of life.

What we discover is that attitude plays an important part in every season. My grandparents became virtual hermits when they retired. I can still remember them sitting in their house in Santa Cruz, California, blinds closed, darkened rooms, sitting and drinking coffee and smoking at the oil covered kitchen table. The overall attitude was that life was over----nothing was left.

On the other hand I also remember the Rosenberg's. They were members of the Christian Church in Maryville, Missouri. When Dale retired from the university where he had taught chemistry, he and his wife, who was a trained nurse, decided to volunteer for the Peace Corps. They had a wonderful time in Africa serving for many years.

⁹ See Brown, William, Ecclesiastes, Interpretation Series, p.40-41.

I met them a decade later when both were in their late 70s. They had reapplied to the Peace Corp and were turned down because of their age. I suggested that they were not too old to apply to be mission workers for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It took a little over one-year to complete the process but finally they were sent as missionaries to Nepal. Dale oversaw a church school and his wife worked in a medical clinic. They served for three years and the letters they sent back were filled with joy and faith. They approached the season of life as an opportunity.

The writer of Ecclesiastes assumes that the reader knows that God is with us in all seasons. God is a constant presence in the good times and bad times.

One point, however, needs to be emphasized. The writer writes as an observer not a commentator. Some have interpreted that because the bad times are mentioned alongside the good times, the bad times are somehow validated by God. So one might say as too many are saying concerning the Middle East--- This is a time for war and such a war is endorsed and commanded by God. So let's do it!!!! Reading Ecclesiastes as a justification and endorsement of the bad times is a misreading of the text.

The observer does not comment on things like the "will of God" and so forth but simply observes that in life there is rain and sunshine. The observer is confident that God is with us in all times. But good times often give way to bad times. Bad times will give way to good times ---that is the way of life.

Some things just change and accepting the change is the faithful response. During the Kirkpatrick Institute that I attended a couple of weeks ago, Dr. Newell Williams¹⁰ talked about the steady attendance decline in churches by referencing the history of the American church in the 20th century. Dr. Williams related that prior to the Great War, now called World War I; the Protestant church dominated the American scene. After the war and because of the war things began to change. One change was a dramatic decline in church attendance at mainline Protestant churches. One reason for that decline was that many mainline churches enthusiastically supported the war, sold war bonds during worship services, and even recruited volunteers for the war as part of worship. In fact leading Protestant pastors saw the war as part of God's grand plan to make the world safe for democracy and Protestant Christianity. One leading Protestant liberal minister actually went to work for the War Department developing patriotic sermon outlines and illustrations that were then mailed to pastors for use on Sunday morning.

After the war the sentiment toward our involvement changed. The pastor who had been preparing the sermon outlines with illustrations of German brutality admitted that the stories of atrocities were faked. As people began to ask why we had entered a war that did not make the "world safe for democracy" as promised by the supporters of the war one answer that people came to was, according to Dr. Williams, "the preachers got us into this war." As a result of this

¹⁰ Kirkpatrick Institute, Santa Fe, NM, July, 2006, sponsored by Brite Divinity School, TCU, Fort Worth, Texas. Dr. Newell Williams is currently the Dean of Brite Divinity School. His training is in Church History. He lectured on the decline of the church in America by relating that decline to 20th century factors and trends.

and other factors there was an abandonment of church by college educated persons and others during the 1920s and 1930s.

Except for a brief time in the 1950s and early 1960s when all churches grew---that decline has continued. Since the mid 1960s all churches---conservative to liberal---including figuring in the new mega churches---since the 1960s religious participation has declined every year, according to Dr. Williams.

Yet, for many congregations the baseline against which they judge their current ministry is the brief dramatic increase in church attendance following World War II that ended in the mid-1960s. During that period almost anything congregations did brought increasing participation. New church buildings were built, new programming developed, seminaries increased, youth programs increased, church camps were built and congregations experienced increasing numbers. This all changed in the mid-1960s to the present as the American church experience entered into a different “season”.

Many congregations continue to conclude that if we work harder, offer “more” the statistics will reverse themselves. Thus in many congregations there are discouragement, anger, and sadness. Many congregations are critical of each other assuming that if we can just find the right “hook”, the right charismatic leadership, the right program that we will return to the time of the 1950s.

The writer of Ecclesiastes would say that we are in a different season---a season of decline. This too will pass, in time. The writer would want us to know that God is with us in all seasons and that our response is to be faithful in all seasons. During this time churches might reevaluate mission, reevaluate

structures and facilities, and recommit themselves to a deeper, spiritual faith. Congregations and pastors must know that in this time there are opportunities and possibilities. Perhaps judging our success by size and numbers is not the best way to be responsive to God's call to discipleship. Perhaps our focus needs to be on God and not so much on our ego and on ourselves. Perhaps?

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Life is filled with seasons. The window reminds us that faith is filled with seasons. There is room in this window for new panels---new ideas----new expressions of faith because God is a God of all seasons.

I close with a prayer from Ministry Health titled "There is a Time" written by Thomas Fischer¹¹:

There is....

A time to build...a time to tear down;
 A time to plant...a time to plow;
 A time to move...a time to wait;
 A time for patience...a time for impatience;
 A time to excite...a time to rest;
 A time to encourage...a time to be encouraged;
 A time for enemies...a time for friends;
 A time for friends....a time for loneliness;
 A time to console...a time to be consoled;
 A time for rejection....a time for acceptance;

There is:

A time to grow...a time to decline;
 A time to weaken...a time to strengthen
 A time to implement...a time to wait;

¹¹ "There is a Time", Thomas Fischer, <http://ministryhealth.net>.

A time to suffer...a time to heal;
A time to endure...a time to rest;
A time to begin...a time to end;

There is....

A time to question...a time to discern;
A time for prudence...a time for wisdom;
A time for resentment....a time for reconciliation;
A time for decline...a time for increase;
A time for success...a time for failure;
A time for recognition...a time for anonymity;

Lord I know...

There is a time for me..
Lead in Your time, Lord
Help me discern Your ways..
And Your time.

Lord, in your time,

Use me...and I will lead,
Call me...and I will follow,
Lord all this I will do,
In Your time.

Amen