Sermon on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
*Embrace the Times…In Light of God*

Last week I preached my first sermon on Ecclesiastes, ever. I enjoyed it so much I thought I’d do it again, even though it means taking a lection from another part of the Church year and moving it to this Sunday.

The part of Ecclesiastes I’ve chosen is chapter 3, the text we use when New Year’s Day falls on a Sunday, which makes sense right?

*For those of you who know Rock music history you’ll remember hearing the Byrds famous song take on this text back in the ‘60’s. It went straight to #1 and became one of the most famous of the anti-Vietnam war anthems. Remember the chorus?*

It’s a vision text, a broad perspective text. It puts the question to us as persons and as a community; how do we experience our lives in this world?

This chapter of the book follows on what I was trying to say last week; instead of a summary here’s a text someone sent the next day, “It’s been a comfort to me to understand that we have a book where the author is saying, more or less, ‘nothing in my experience seems to line up with what I’ve been taught about life and the nature of God’s promises; everything’s fleeting anyway and doesn’t last, but rather than despair and depress, I’m going to trust in God regardless.”

That’s a great takeaway from what I was trying to say, quite possibly better said than anything I actually did say!

So we keep that in mind but now the Teacher wants to say, yes, everything is fleeting but still “There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.”

Everything has a mere breath-like reality to it, yes, but everything is also in some way a part of a greater whole.

There is a flow to the universe and the person who is wise will seek to understand this flow and live life in light of this truth.

In order to drive home this point, the Teacher uses a series of statements that contain polar extremes as a way of embracing what lies between them. The first set contains the rest of the sets, “[there is] a time to be born and a time to die.”

There doesn’t seem to be a clear reason for the ordering of the statements that follow, nor is it clear whether we’re to take the statements literally or metaphorically.

For instance, a time to tear and a time to mend might be taken literally, especially in a time when each family made their own clothing. It also speaks to the relational and social fabric of a family and community. Sometimes we can heal a relationship sometimes that’s just not possible.

“a time to mourn and a time to dance,” sure, that’s literally true but also I think of a season of letting go and disengaging and a season of embracing and engaging with new people and new realities.

If we were to craft our own pairs I’m sure we could come up with some doozies, I was joking with someone the other day that “there’s a time for pizza and then (wait for it) there’s time for dessert.”

My dear wife would say “Allen there’s a time to be on your phone and then there’s a time to be cleaning the bathroom!”

Seriously though, this vision of the world, a world in which everything has a place, the good, the bad and the ugly is quite different than what is generally on offer today.

On the one hand, there are many people, including many Christians who seem eager to escape the realities of this present world by appealing to heavenly realities, “if I just close my eyes and ears to the problems, maybe I’ll be able to find peace, maybe I’ll be able to endure; besides, there’s always heaven where everything will be alright!”

This is the “life drools, heaven rules” position. This is the position that Karl Marx mocked when he said “religion is the opiate of the masses.”

But of course, to embrace this escapist “faith” (in quotes), this vague hope, is to misunderstand the first verse of our second reading which says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

It is to misunderstand our gospel reading which talks about “an unfailing treasure in heaven.” More on that in a minute.

On the other hand, and as a popular alternative to leaps of faith in the face of the uncertainties of life and, indeed life after death, is to try and live life facing the reality of death straight on: we’re not going to live for ever, so let’s seize the day, “Carpe Diem!”

Let’s call this the polar opposite of heaven rules, life drools; carpie diem is taken to mean “heaven drools, life rules.”

The phrase was made famous in popular culture by the movie *Dead Poets Society* in which Robin Williams plays the role of a new teacher in a traditional private school.

Early in the movie he gathers his pupils around a cabinet in the school hallway that displays photographs of sporting heroes and trophies from the past, many of them now dead.

He invites the students to imagine what these past heroes would say to them if they had a voice and then as they stand in reverie he moves among them whispering in their ears “carpie diem.”

The remainder of the movie the boys set out to squeeze all the life they can out of their schooldays, sometimes with humour, but also with tragic consequences.

The Teacher’s philosophy is, to some extent, that we *should* seize the day, fleeting though it is; he says explicitly, “I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live.”

It is indeed the appropriate response to the totality of reality, the totality of the times that are ultimately beyond our control and that simply *are* with all the polar opposites imaginable that we should cease worrying so much about how things are going to work out and concentrate on living joyfully in the moment that is currently given to us.

Amen! What marks out what the Teacher says from superficial spirituality on the one hand and secular, carpi diem philosophy on the other is that it is centered on God.

Let’s call this the “God rules, therefore heaven doesn’t drool, life doesn’t drool; both are cool!” I know, I know, poet laureate here I come!

To “seize the day”, to live fully in the moment is an expression of faith first, a faith that leads to fulfillment. So much of Christian spirituality these days seems to have it the other way around: self-fulfillment first, tag on a bit of God and spirituality as needed.

But this leads to the desire for “gain” and leads to the despair that we talked about last week. To seize the day, to find self-fulfillment in our relationships, our work and our pleasures is to do so, says the Teacher, as a gift from God.

Indeed it was faith in what they did not yet see, but trusted nevertheless that led Abraham and Sarah on their great journey that changed *this* world though they did not see it’s fulfillment.

It is the forward-looking, “for others” focus that Hebrews is highlighting when it talks about the conviction of things not seen. To live well in this world is to live into and from God’s great mission of embracing all of Creation as persons made in the image of a God who is forgiving, who desires all things, all people to flourish.

Self-fulfillment comes, ultimately from living in light of God right where we are! Since all times and realities have their place we can embrace the different seasons in our lives as opportunities to express this sense of living in light of God.

This means I never have to have the fear of missing out #foma; I never have to have the fear that I’m not living heroically enough; there’s a place for the small and the great, the private and the public, the heroic and the ordinary.

I’m reassured by Ecclesiastes that it’s okay to age, that it’s okay to be in grief; that there is only so much I can do, I can’t comprehend the totality of things, I can’t change everything but I can live faithfully in this moment, in this time, with you and you and you and you can too!

This is what Jesus means when he talks about laying up treasure in heaven which is not a place but a synonym for God! And when we get to “heaven,” to God in the next phase of our existence we will see it as not the destination we were pining for but the extension, another “time,” another season that will be just what we need then and there.

So live now, in your time, live now, leaving the incomprehensible whole to God but alive to the moment, alive to what God is alive to; then you will find that the Son of Man has come, and will come and you’ll be already doing his will. Amen.