**Time and Seasons**

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

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June 16, 2019

**Turn, Turn, Turn**

As a young child I knew the words of wisdom from our Scripture reading very well because I knew them to be the lyrics of that pop song “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds. I was pretty impressed when later on I found out that these song lyrics actually originated from the Bible. The Byrds version of this song was released in 1966 and I have here my father’s original vinyl LP from that time. This record has journeyed with my family through probably all of the seasons the lyrics describe. My dad must have bought this soon after he arrived in the UK, escaping the war that had just broken out in his homeland Rhodesia. He then took it with him back to newly independent Zimbabwe in 1980 when all the exiles returned home and the country entered into a time of peace, healing, and rebuilding.

We continued to listen to this song on cassette compilations that my dad made and played through many different seasons of family life. When my father died in Zimbabwe in 2004, I took this album back with me to my home in the UK during my season of weeping and mourning, and then brought it with me to my new home in the US. I have it with me now that it’s my “time to speak,” and I have it here with me because it’s Father’s Day and so I’m remembering my dad.

To those of you whose fathers are also no longer alive, I pray that pleasant memories of them visit you today. To those whose fathers didn’t treat them as they should have, and to those who, despite their deep desire, are unable to be fathers, and so for whom this is a painful time, I pray you feel God’s love embracing you today and always.

**Seasons Change**

I found out as I was working on trying to understand and exegete the phrase “turn, turn, turn,” that the Byrds didn’t write the lyrics for the altered pop song version. It was actually Pete Seeger. In the same way, the authorship of Ecclesiastes is often attributed to King Solomon, but the real author’s identity is unknown. The author of Ecclesiastes is referred to as Qoheleth which in Hebrew means “the one who assembles” (possibly students) or “gatherer,” in this case a gatherer of wisdom sayings from the Hebrew tradition. Ecclesiastes is thought to have been written in Judea sometime between 450 and 325 BCE.

The changing of seasons and change in general is something all our ancient teachers from across the globe understood very well. Lao Tzu, credited as the author of the Tao De Ching writing in China in the 6th century BCE, warns that: “Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.” The Buddha who lived in ancient India in the 5th century BCE cautioned that: “All conditioned things are impermanent.” And then Heraclitus, the 4th-5th century BCE Greek philosopher, observed that “change is the only constant in life.”

**We fear the changing of seasons**

This is timeless and universal wisdom. Change is not easy though. In fact it can often be quite painful. In Ecclesiastes 3 there are a wide range of times and seasons listed, but unfortunately, as a modern culture, our focus has been narrowed. As a society we promote the pursuit of happiness and take pride in exceptionalism. We tend to expect constant growth and prosperity, and the achievability of the American dream. There’s belief that bad things shouldn’t happen to you if you work hard, live right and you’re a good person. This places a heavy weight of responsibility on an individual to perfectly manage their life and to be successful, therefore ascribing power and an unrealistic sense of control to this individual that they really don’t have. There’s a higher expectation that Christians because of their faith in God should have some immunity from tough times. But bad things do happen, and seasons constantly change. Often there is a sense of failure, shame, and self-blame when things don’t go as they should and a season changes.

Even when the change is supposedly for the better it can still be challenging. With any change there’s the loss of the old and familiar, and with that often feelings of grief and a loss of identity. An example is when moving from full time employment into retirement. And there’s also often a sense of uncertainty around the new and with that often a feeling of fear of the unknown. When our seasons change without warning into an unfavorable one, resistance to this change can often lead to feelings of rejection and alienation from God, and also feelings of denial, anger, sadness, which are all components of grief.

During an unfavorable season one often wrestles with questions like: “Is God punishing me? Have I angered God? Am I bad?” Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” recognizes these universal and timeless questions, and his answers, which are chapter headings in his book include: “sometimes there is no reason,” and “there are no exceptions for nice people.” Instead of asking the question “why did this happen?” Rabbi Kushner encourages us to ask “what do I do now that it has happened?”

**The Role of Faith**

The answer to “what do I do now” to me is the role of faith. Faith does not protect us from unfavorable seasons, but it does give us a different perspective from which to view them. Belief in a loving God leaves little room for feelings of shame, rejection, and abandonment. The sacred Scriptures of the Christian faith, our Holy Bible, is full of stories of how different characters navigated their difficult seasons and helps us with our meaning-making, giving us a lens through which to interpret events in our life. What the Bible reminds us is that change is constant, and the presence of God is also constant.

**Liminal Spaces and Transitions**

The verse from Ecclesiastes is a reminder that different seasons will come and go. Recognizing what season you are in and when that is ending is important, because if we don’t we could get stuck in denial and liminal spaces. A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and what’s 'next.' It’s a place of transition, waiting, and uncertainty. Metaphorically speaking, one door has closed, but the next one hasn’t opened yet.

Jacob, grandson of Abraham and second born son of Isaac, is someone who saw many different seasons over the course of his life. Jacob is what we might nowadays call a bit of a “hustler.” And he was a total momma’s boy who very cleverly stole his brother Esau’s birthright (with the help of his mother). He then fled to the land of Paddan-aram where through the scheming of his uncle Laban ended up marrying two of Laban’s daughters, his cousins, Rachel and Leah. After amassing a small fortune and after loads of drama, Jacob decided to return home to the land of Canaan.

The journey is quite eventful and is a liminal space for Jacob. He leaves his old life, home, and identity, and also kind of burns his bridges on his way out. But he does all of this not knowing whether he will be accepted by his brother Esau. So, while still on his journey he decides to send messengers ahead of him hoping that he can make peace with Esau.The messengers returned to Jacob and said, *“We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.”*

Jacob is greatly afraid and distressed, and not knowing what else to do cries out to God in despair. After this he sends gifts ahead for his brother Esau to appease him and then spent the night at the camp at Peniel anxiously waiting alone deeply afraid. Sometime during the night a stranger appears and wrestles with Jacob all through the night and in the process dislocates Jacob’s hip. When day is breaking the stranger asks Jacob to let him go. Jacob sensing that this is no mere mortal, and Jacob, still being a total hustler says *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”* And with that the stranger responds and says: “*You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.*”

Jacob has cried out to God who has responded. He has just been through a very painful rite of passage, and then soon after this has a very emotional reconciliation with his brother Esau. He then starts the new season of his life, still filled with an abundance of drama though. Now while I don’t want to encourage the image of God as a wrestler, I think there are valuable lessons to be learned from Jacob’s experience. Jacob has an experience of a God who is personal and right there in the details and messiness of his life. Jacob has a lot to feel guilty about, but he still cries out to God and then wrestles with God in order to get his blessing, and to get out of his liminal space. Jacob meets a God who is not afraid of the darkness, of engaging one on one with Jacob. Jacob has an experience of a God, who despite all the different seasons he goes through, is loving, eternal, forgiving, constantly present. We have this too, but in the midst of a tough season it is easy to forget.

I think the answer to Rabbi Kushner’s question for tough times: “what do I do now that it has happened?” is the refrain from the song “turn, turn, turn.” To me it’s a reminder to us constantly turn and refocus our attention on God through all our struggles as we move through all the different seasons of our life.

**Where is God in your season?**

All of us gathered here are going through different seasons and I know this because I regularly read the Caring and Connected email. For those that don’t currently receive this, it’s an email from the church letting us all know about births, engagements, marriage announcements and wedding anniversaries, graduations, illnesses, move and transitions and deaths and funerals, as well as a lovely prayer at the end with many of your names on it. I like it because it’s recognition of the different rites of passage and season changes we are all going through, and in receiving it I feel like a part of a village journeying with you through it all. Not only do we change seasons with God, as a church community, we also do it together.

**Every season has its fruit**

Speaking of journeying together, our church and denomination has been going through a season of darkness and uncertainty, a liminal space following the results of the Special General Conference of the United Methodist Church earlier this year. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “only in the darkness can you see the stars.” At the Michigan Area Annual Conference I saw just that. If you’d like to hear more about that, then please join us for a debrief and Q&A session after the service. Although as a denomination we’re still in a liminal space, there are stars lighting the way to a new season and a lot of us are feeling very hopeful.

**How is it with your soul? What season are you in?**

So in closing, and as a good Methodist should, I’d like to put the question to you that John Wesley regularly asked the early Methodists: “how is it with your soul? And I would also add: “what season are you in right now?” But most importantly, “can you feel God with you in the midst of it?” For those celebrating or who are in a good season, we share your joy. For those who are stuck in a liminal space, in a transition, in the midst of a tough season, feeling distant from God, are wrestling with God, or who are even feeling that God is absent, I’d like to share this blessing that Amy Kennedy our amazing and deeply compassionate Congregational Care minister sent to me when I was going through a very tough season. It’s by Jan Richardson and it’s called Jacob’s Blessing:

*If this blessing were easy anyone could claim it.*

*As it is, I am here to tell you that it will take some work.*

*This is the blessing that visits you in the struggling, in the wrestling, in the striving.*

*This is the blessing that comes after you have left everything behind,*

*After you have stepped out, after you have crossed into that realm*

*Beyond every landmark you have known.*

*This is the blessing that takes all night to find.*

*It’s not that this blessing is so difficult as if it were not filled with grace*

*Or with the love that lives in every line.*

*It’s simply that it requires you to want it, to ask for it, to place yourself in its path.*

*It demands that you stand to meet it when it arrives,*

*That you stretch yourself in ways that you didn’t know you could move,*

*That you agree not to give up.*

*So when this blessing comes, borne in the hands of the difficult angel who has chosen you,*

*Do not let go. Give yourself into its grip.*

*It will wound you, but I tell you there will come a day when what felt to you like limping*

*Was something more like dancing as you moved into the cadence of your new and blessed name.*

 Amen.