

“Blessed to be a Blessing: Blessed with Time”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Note: “Ecclesiastes” is the Greek word for “Qoheleth” which means “Gatherer” or “Teacher” -- the pen name of the author of this book. These verses are often read at funerals marking the passing of life and the passing of time.

I got a call Friday that a friend from our soccer community had died suddenly. Her 12 year-old daughter plays soccer with our daughter. Christie also leaves a young son and her husband. She was only 43 years old.

I have another friend who grew up in New Orleans. Her mother has lung cancer and her father has brain cancer. Shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit, her mother had entered hospice care, but they had to evacuate and now they live in an apartment in Florida far from all their friends. Their daughter lives here in Northern Virginia and she doesn't know whether she should stay here and keep working, or go to Florida to stay with her parents until they both die. And then there's the house in New Orleans to deal with.

And then I have another friend from New Orleans who lives in Alexandria, but her four sisters still lived in New Orleans until they all lost each of their homes in the hurricane. This friend's mother died in April and her body had been donated to a local medical school – which was her mother's wish. When she'd signed the papers a few years ago to donate her body to science, there was a critical need. But by the time she died, there too many bodies donated and so my friend's mother's body was being stored in a morgue until it was needed. Unfortunately the morgue flooded in the hurricane, and so now they don't know where her mother's body is and they've been told that they will probably never find her.

This is all rather upsetting news.

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If you were here last Sunday, you might remember that I preached on the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Today the sermon is on another Old Testament book – Ecclesiastes – which was probably written about the same time as Proverbs. Also . . .

- Both books are believed by most people to have been written by the wise King Solomon.
- Both books were probably not written by Solomon, according to scholars.

- Both books include pithy sayings that you might needlepoint onto pillows if people still did such things.

But Ecclesiastes is to Proverbs what *The Portable Curmudgeon* is to *Chicken Soul for the Soul*. Where Proverbs teach us that “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold”¹ Ecclesiastes teaches that “A good name is better than precious ointment, but the day of death is better than the day of birth.”²

The book of Proverbs teaches us that “the reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.”³ But Ecclesiastes teaches “all is vanity.”⁴ In other words: What’s the point of life?

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun goes down . . .

All things are wearisome; more than one can express . . .

*There is nothing new under the sun . . .*⁵

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One of my colleagues recently told me that she is a Christian because of Ecclesiastes. “It’s real,” she said. “It doesn’t tell me that if I do what’s right, only good things will happen. It doesn’t tell me that if I work hard, I’ll always be successful, or if I stay on a straight path that everything will work out for me. *Ecclesiastes is real*. It tells how the world really is: inconsistent, inscrutable, and sometimes completely unfair.”

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Ecclesiastes was one of the last books to be included into the Old Testament⁶ and to say that the early councils considered keeping it out of the canon is an understatement.

¹ Proverbs 22:1

² Ecclesiastes 7:1

³ Proverbs 22:4

⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:2

⁵ Assorted verses from Ecclesiastes 1

⁶ In Luke 24:44, Jesus refers to “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.” It seems that it was clear to a first century Jew what the law and prophets included, but only the psalms are mentioned as “wisdom literature” – a later inclusion in the Hebrew canon. The original texts in the Hebrew canon were the law and the prophets. In about 2nd century BC, a third section of scripture was included so that the canon included The Law, The Prophets, and The Writings. “The Writings” were initially the Psalms, Proverbs and Job. At the end of the 1st century AD, the Jewish historian Josephus generally did not include Ecclesiastes in his list of 22 books included in

Up until the 2nd century, there was still some question about whether or not Ecclesiastes should be included in holy scripture at all.

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But it was included and it still is and today we read from what is perhaps the best-known part. In fact, these are some of the best-known verses in all of the Bible. Pete Seeger even wrote a song with them.⁷

To everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.

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The point of this passage is that God is the one who determines the rhythms and times of life. We might think we control our times and seasons, but actually that's God's job. Our job is to use the time with which we have been blessed in a way that brings some good to the world.

But we have a big problem. We have turned time into something it's not. We've turned time from a blessing to a commodity, much like money.

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Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying that "Time is money" and that's as true as ever. Just as we have twisted the Biblical understanding of money and sharing our money, we have completely twisted the Biblical purpose of time. Time has become a thing we can control and manipulate. Or at least we think we can.

Joan Chittister is a Roman Catholic nun who is a popular writer and speaker.⁸ In fact, she is a Benedictine nun meaning she was trained and now lives according to the Order of Benedict⁹ – a rule of life written in the 6th century to organize each day around prayer and work. Public prayer is to take place in short intervals once at night and seven distinct times during the day:

Before sunrise (*invitatory*)
 At Sunrise (*lauds*)
 Midmorning (*terce*)

holy scripture. However, the Council at Jamnia ratified the commonly included books of the OT in 90 AD which did include Ecclesiastes. For more information, see <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/sbrandt/canon.htm>.

⁷ (*To Everything*) *Turn, Turn, Turn* recorded by The Byrds in 1965.

⁸ Sister Joan Chittister is a regular columnist for the ***National Catholic Reporter***. She has a PhD from Penn. State in psychology and is the author of over 30 books on spiritual and societal issues.

⁹ Benedict of Nursia (480 – 543 AD) was the founder of western monasticism.

Midday (*sext*)
 Mid-afternoon (*none*)
 Sunset (*vespers*)
 Bedtime (*compline*)

And there is one more time that's up to the pray-er. (If you are actually in a monastery, it's often 3 in the morning – *matins* or *vigils*.)

Joan Chittister wrote that:

“We have objectified time and packaged it . . .

We put it on watches and calendars and schedules.

We make wise remarks about losing it and wasting it and spending it and killing it.

We are good capitalists, but poor poets, because we use the same verbs to talk about time as we do to talk about money. We save time and count time and invest time.

*We forget, too often, to savor time,
 to enjoy time,
 to trust time, all time.*

Instead we fill it and wrench it. We race against it and fight it. We make it an enemy instead of friend. And so we lose it.¹⁰

This past week, knowing I was preaching about time, little lessons kept coming at me, as if they were gnawing at my toes. I was working late one night and someone stopped by and congratulated me for working so late: “Well, that’s what we expect,” she said. “You’re supposed to be working 24/7.” Really? That’s what people expect? I hope not.

I was planning activities with a couple of people throughout the week, and as we looked at our calendars and at our schedules it became clear that we have filled almost every waking moment with activities. If there is a slice of time that remains unfilled, it’s seen as an opening.

“Oh *here!* I have 30 minutes on October 24th. Of course we can get together and meet about whatever we need to meet about.”

¹⁰ From Joan Chittister’s sermon “Time: The Great Spiritual Director” broadcast on “Day One” on February 16, 1997.

Maybe it makes us feel important to be so busy. *Everyone needs us.* Everyone wants us.

But “the purpose of time is not accumulation”¹¹ – accumulation of clocked hours to prove our worth, the accumulation of appointments.

The purpose of time – as the book of Ecclesiastes teaches us – is to move through the seasons and rhythms of life *in the journey toward becoming complete human beings.* A complete life includes birth and death, planting and harvesting, killing and healing, breaking down and building up.

There are times when we become more human by crying or laughing, being quiet or speaking up. When was the last time we looked over the course of one of our days and reflected over *what made us more human* – and what did *not*? My sense is that we are least like human beings – and more like mindless insects – when we move from thing to thing to thing, stumbling over each other without relishing in the moment that God has given to us.

Bill Martin is a spiritual director in Arizona who wrote a book called *The Art of Pastoring* and almost every pastor I know owns this little book.¹² It’s a collection of reflections that are good for personal devotional time.

The funny thing is that all the pastors I know who use this book use only one of the reflections out of the whole book. It’s #9 called “Rest.”

When Bill Martin counsels ministers, the first thing he does is ask to see their calendars – or these days, their Blackberries. “It reveals volumes about that pastor’s spiritual condition, values, fears, and ambitions. It tells who their bosses are, who their lover is, and how much value they place on their soul.”

This reflection is not just for clergy. It’s for everyone who hopes to have some kind of spiritual life:

*If you fill your calendar with important appointments
you will have no time for God.
If you fill your spare time with essential reading
you will starve your soul.
If you fill your mind with worry about budgets . . .
the pains in your chest and the ache in your shoulders
will betray you.
If you try to conform to the expectations of those around you
you will forever be their slave.
Work a modest day,*

¹¹ Chittister, *ibid.*

¹² Martin, William C. *The Art of Pastoring: Contemplative Reflections.* CTS Press: Decatur, Georgia, 1994.

*then step back and rest.
This will keep you close to God.*

I used to think that people in Washington, DC were so busy because they were saving the world, quite literally. But then I realized that not everyone could be saving the world. Actually maybe we are trying to save ourselves, which is rather sad.

Christians, at least, are supposed to believe that we already have a Savior. We don't have to save ourselves. And in truth, it's impossible. Because no matter how hard we try to control time, and how tightly we run our "ship" – whether that ship is a household, a classroom, a boardroom, office, a department, a church, or a literal ship – only God really controls our time. In the midst of all our control and scheduling, loved ones die, homes are flooded, earthquakes crush people, wars rage, and hearts break. There is joy and there is sorrow.

But Ecclesiastes reminds us that:

*It is God's gift that we should eat and drink
and take pleasure in our work.*

What we do might not last forever. But what God does is eternal. And if we have any sense at all, we will stand in awe of that.

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Time is a blessing. The Psalmist wrote that:

*The days of our life are 70 years, or perhaps 80 if we are strong . . .*¹³

Of course there are many here who are indeed blessed, living well past 80. And there are others who live only a few hours. And so we must remember:

*To count our days that we may gain a wise heart.*¹⁴

Hug your children. Squeeze the hand of the person sitting beside you. Notice how gorgeous the sky is this morning. Remember to tell someone how beautiful she looks or how brave he has been. Because every moment is a great blessing. And one day this life will be over.

In closing, I'd like you to think of a picture you might have – on the wall in your home, on your desk, in an album. A photograph of people you love or those you loved in the past.

We have a photograph taken when our firstborn – Ben – was just a couple weeks old at the Edmiston Family Reunion. It was obscenely hot even though we were sitting in the shade. Ben is screaming his head off and I'm holding him around the waist so that – in his fury – he won't leap out of my arms. There are bags under my eyes and my hair

¹³ Psalm 90:10

¹⁴ Psalm 90:12

could use a good brushing. Fred, my husband is there along with my siblings and their spouses. My sister's boyfriend is in the picture. (He is now her husband and the father of her four children.) My sister in law also looks tired and is holding their one-year old daughter (now a college freshman). She's the first grandchild and is used to having numerous photographs taken of her every day of her life, so she is actually posing. My mother and father are sitting in the middle of the photograph and they look perfectly happy as if the weather is perfect. They are beaming – so overjoyed to have their children and grandchildren all around them.

I love that photograph for a lot of reasons. It is the last picture of what I used to call “my whole family.” Little did any of us know that my mother would be gone just weeks later. And life would never again be the same.

I used to hold that picture and weep, thinking, “We had no idea how happy we were.” I held lots of pity parties for myself sobbing over that picture. And then it hit me: *Are we aware of how happy we are **now**?* I don't want us to look back on *this* day and say, “We had no idea how happy we were.”

There are blessings on this day and there is sorrow. But God has created us to grow and move through different seasons and it's God's pleasure for us to be happy and enjoy this life.

Let us pray:

Holy God, our ways are not your ways and our thoughts are not your thoughts. But we know that you love us and want us to be happy and satisfied in this life. Make us hopeful even in our sorrow, make us mindful even in our joy that the time we have is a blessing we have been given to use for good. Keep us aware of how precious these days are, that we might use our time to your glory through Jesus Christ our Savior – Amen.