

Knowing the Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Whether you realized it or not, there is a rather serious debate happening between me and the members of the worship team here at First Baptist Church.

I know what you're thinking, but, no, it's not about the little prepackaged cups for communion that you cannot open without spilling all over yourself.

And, no, it's not about whether we ought to be passing the offering plate again, or about whether we ought to reinstitute the "greeting" time at the start of service — or, as most introverts refer to it, their own personal hell.

It is not about the new A/V system or the stained glass or the color of the paint on the walls or about the pew color.

The debate that has raged on for weeks now between me and the worship team revolves around what kind of clock we ought to have hanging on the back wall, so that I will know when to stop talking and let you all go to lunch.

The clock that was back there died at 11:15 AM, so whenever I glanced up at it, I always thought that I still had 15 minutes left. They changed the battery, but for whatever reason, the clock kept stopping at 15 after, and I continued to think that I still had fifteen minutes.

So one day the worship team brought the dead clock to our meeting, laid it on the table, and said they wanted to solve this problem. I said, "What problem?"

They said, "You keep going too long."

"What are you talking about? I finish every service fifteen minutes early."

They said, "We're getting you a new clock and throwing this broken one out."

I said, "Fine. But if you insist on getting a new clock, I want one of those cat clocks with the eyes and the tail that go back and forth."

They said, "No."

I said, "Then how about a Mickey Mouse clock? You know, with the white-gloved hands that point at the hour and the minute."

They said, "How about a cuckoo clock that drowns you out at 11:30 AM, so you'll get the hint."

We compromised and settled on the one that's there now. And, if you were to look at that clock and you were to come to the conclusion that that clock is both functional and does not distract from worship, then you're not alone. The rest of the Worship Team agrees with you.

I might be exaggerating just a little about how that conversation really went, but I did actually recommend both a cat clock or a Mickey Mouse clock. See? I don't *always* get what I want.

I have come to conclude that at least the person behind the pulpit ought to know what time it is, but preachers are not the only ones who have to keep track of time. We all do. There are appointments to keep, deadlines to meet, buses to catch, papers to turn in.

Calendars and clocks have become our keepers in modern society, but that wasn't always the case.

In his book, *Time Wars*, Jeremy Rifkin writes that the idea of our lives and the events in them being controlled by blocks of allocated time is, in terms of centuries at least, a relatively new idea. We can thank the Benedictine monks for that, "whose passion for organizing and filling every minute of the day grew out of St. Benedict's conviction that 'idleness is the enemy of the soul.'" It was in the 15th century that clocks begin to rival church steeples in the town squares of Europe, and not until the 17th century did those clocks have minute hands (Joanna Adams, "Should there be a clock in the sanctuary?", *Day1.org*, January 3, 2010).

The measuring of minutes has given us much in the way of productivity and organization. I doubt UPS or Amazon would have become the companies they are without the ability to measure minutes. But when life became divided and subdivided into hour, minutes, and seconds, some things were lost.

For one thing, we've lost our natural rhythms for keeping time. We became so focused on the minutes of our days that the natural seasons seemed to sneak up on us. There is snow on the ground this morning, but it seems like summer was just last week.

I don't know about you, but my calendar is usually scheduled at least three weeks in advance – most minutes planned and accounted for three weeks out. But could I tell you on most nights whether the moon is waxing or waning? No.

We live at an increasing distance from the ancient but timeless understanding that each day, each moment, is an unearned gift from a gracious God, and instead think of time as fillable and billable measurement on our calendars.

Time, though, is a mysterious thing. Things like clocks and calendars convince us that we are in control of it, but in all reality time does not bow to us in the slightest. It continues its ever present march forward. And for our part, all we get to do is choose *how* we will use our time. As a new year begins, I think it's time to rethink time.

The Bible has a book named after an ancient teacher of wisdom who was called Qoholeth. Later, his name was translated in Greek to Ecclesiastes. This teacher, this sage understood time very differently than the way we do. He wrote in the time after the Israelites had been exiled by Babylon, an experience that taught the Hebrew people that the human experience would never only be “mountain top” experiences. It would also consist of deep valleys, too.

In our passage this morning, Qoholeth takes a bird’s eye view of the human experience and paints a picture with words of what the breadth of a lifetime looks like. He says:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under the heavens.

A time to be born and a time to die.

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

A time to kill and a time to heal.

A time to rip down and a time to build.

A time to weep and a time to laugh.

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to fling stones and a time to gather stones in.

A time to embrace and a time to pull back from embracing.

A time to seek and time to lose.

A time to keep and a time to fling away.

A time to tear and a time to sew.

A time to keep silent and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate.

A time for war and a time for peace” (Robert Alter’s translation, *The Writings*, 685).

Too often, we mistake the forest for the trees. We focus on the minutes rather than the seasons. We get so busy trying to manage time, to be in charge of time, that we are rarely present to the moment we are in.

In contrast to our desire to control time, Qoholeth says that time happens to us. He says there is a time for everything – good and bad; and the difference between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person knows what time it is.

So there are times for mourning, but also for dancing. There are times for laughing, but also for weeping. There are times for tearing down and building up, times for embracing and for refraining from embracing, times to keep silent and times to speak, times to tear and times to sew.

The challenge of the human experience is to be able to discern what time it is and to live into it fully.

The pastor and theologian, Martin Copenhaver, talks about it as the difference between balance and rhythm. He says:

“Everyone is talking about balance these days. We want more balance. We complain about the lack of balance. We strive for the right balance between our work lives and the rest of our lives. Magazines provide carefully balanced lists of suggestions about how get more balance. But, frankly, to me the whole concept of balance sounds exhausting, like balancing on one foot or balancing a tray full of glasses while walking on a rocky path — I can do it, to be sure, but not for long. I don’t know of anyone who can stay balanced for very long.

But balance is not a biblical virtue. Instead, the way of life that is commended in the Bible is more about rhythm than it is about balance. There is the rhythm of the week, six days of work and one day of rest, set within the larger rhythms of the liturgical year. Jesus spent time in intense engagement with the people around him in rhythm with time alone or with close friends. And then there is the basic spiritual rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. Indeed, there is a ‘time for every matter under heaven,’ which is an ancient affirmation for the place of rhythm in our lives.

When we strive for balance it is like standing on one foot. when we respond to the rhythms of creation, it is more like taking part in a dance — first one foot, then the other. Which sounds more life giving to you?” (“Got Rhythm,” from UCC’s *Still Speaking Devotionals*, September 12, 2003).

How we embrace or resist time determines how full our lives can be. Do we stand in the river of time trying to get it to turn back and flow upstream? Do we try to dam it up and keep it from moving on? Or do we submit to its pull and let its current carry us through the many seasons of life?

Theologically speaking, Qoholeth doesn’t offer us much of an answer other than the idea that at the end of the day, whether we fight it or not, resist it or not, submit to it or not, time always wins. So, he says, why not enjoy it?

The best thing we can do, he says, is “to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live” (Eccl. 3:12). By that, he doesn’t mean that there aren’t difficult seasons, seasons to mourn and weep. He simply means that we can’t control the moment we’ve been given. We can’t determine the seasons of our lives. But we can choose how we will live in them.

Did you notice that in those seven verses — the “a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot what was planted...” — did you notice that in those seven verses are seven pairs of contrasting statements about the good parts of life and the hard ones? Seven verses. Seven paired lines that paint a picture of the totality of life from birth to death.

Scholars point out that this use of the number seven was no accident. Qoholeth was too wise, too intentional to have that poem be built around the number seven by happenstance. They say, instead, Qoholeth’s use of the number seven was absolutely and utterly intentional (Robert Alter, *The Writings*, 685).

Why use seven paired contrasting statements that encompass the totality of human life? Because the number seven was associated with the sacred. It was Qoholeth's way of saying all of life — from work to play, from laughter to tears, from birth to death — all of it is sacred.

And our job isn't to try and shortcut or detour around the hard parts, but to live through them. And our part isn't to try and slow down or prolong the good parts, but to enjoy them. All happen in their time — and our part is to live in the time we've been given.

Joan Chittister tells this story:

"Where shall I look for enlightenment?" the disciple asked.

"Here," the wise one said.

"When will it happen?" the disciple asked.

"It is happening right now," the wise one answered.

"Then why don't I experience it?"

"Because you don't look."

"What should I look for?"

"Nothing. Just look."

"Look at what?"

"At anything your eyes light on."

"But must I look in a special way?"

"No, the ordinary way will do."

"But don't I always look the ordinary way?"

"No, you don't."

"But why ever not?"

"Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else" (*There Is a Season*, Orbis Books, 1999).

There is a little bit of that disciple in each of us. Consumed by the power of the past or the allure of the future, we are mostly somewhere else.

But what if we were here in the right now?

Evelyn Underhill calls it the "Sacrament of the Present Moment," because that is where God wants to meet us — not in the past, not in the future, but in the present.

And any moment in which God wants to meet us is a sacred moment, which means that every moment has the possibility of being holy.

But we will risk missing them if we "are mostly somewhere else."

Amen.