

Always a time and a season for God's Response
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Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 4:1-11

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear 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 scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.*

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was finished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "it is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

But by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

And 'On their hands they will bear you up,

So that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him,

"Again, it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

And serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

There is indeed a time for everything. A season for every activity under the heavens. A time to weep, a time to laugh. A time to plant and a time to uproot. If we were to gather at one big virtual table over zoom, are their times and seasons you would want to add to Ecclesiastes? If I were to make some additions, I might add something like --there is a time for seamless internet connection and a time for technology to fail you-- Or maybe --a time for snowy, cold weather and a time for please spring can you get here any faster I have a really bad case of the February blues—and maybe even –there is a time for a pandemic and there is a time for this to freaking end because we are all sick and tired.

When we read Ecclesiastes, we cannot just read part of it. Yes, it would be nice to just read part of the pairings, like --a time to love – and not so much a time to hate. It is also (as we all know) not a “check the box kind of list.” Go out and start a war one day and go and make peace another day. This list reflects what life is – it is full of profound joy and it is also full of heart stopping grief.

I re-watched the Pixar movie, “Inside Out” recently. Such a good movie. If you have not seen it, it is about a young, 11-year-old girl named Riley. We, the audience, watch Riley's life unfold from the inside of her mind as she moves halfway across the country and navigates a new city, house and school. Inside Riley's mind are 5 main characters that represent each of Riley's feelings - Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust and Sadness.

In the beginning, one could see sadness (although she is honestly my favorite character) as a little bit of a downer... and Joy as the superhero who jumps in and makes sure Riley is always happy.

But at some point, in the movie, we learn that Joy is not always the answer. We witness a scene in which sadness comforts Riley's imaginary friend, Bing Bong. Riley is growing up and no longer needs Bing Bong the way she used to.

This becomes apparent when Riley's mind begins destroying imaginary land and with it -a rocket ship Bing Bong and she made together.

Bing Bong is heartbroken over this loss and Joy tries to cheer him up with – come on! We can fix this!

Whereas Sadness sits next to Bing Bong and says, “I am sorry they took your rocket. They took something you loved and its gone.”

And then simply says: “Yes, it is sad.”

Joy, Sadness and us, the audience, learn that Riley needs both of them. Joy and Sadness - they are each a part of who Riley is. Each of them have unique gifts to offer.

There is a time for joy. And a time for sadness.

There is a time to motivate and inspire and there is a time to just sit with someone and *be*.

Ecclesiastes acknowledges the paradoxes of life. The ups and downs. I read some commentaries and listened to the Bible Project, which helped me better understand how this passage fits into the whole of Ecclesiastes, part of the Hebrew Bible's wisdom literature.

In the beginning and end of the book, the author says, “Hevel. Hevel, Everything is Hevel.”

Hevel is usually translated as “meaningless” in many English versions, but that does not accurately capture what Hevel means. In Hebrew, hevel means vapor or breath. The Bible Project describes hevel in two folds: 1. refers to life as temporary and fleeting AND 2. life as an enigma (a mystery, hard to understand).¹

Visualizing hevel reminds me that we cannot snatch vapor or our breath and hold on to it. It is not solid. Likewise, we cannot snatch life and freeze time either. We cannot control when good things are going to happen to us or when bad things are going to happen to us.

This is not to say – throw your hands up because there is nothing you can do.

I want to hold this sense that we are not in control carefully because this could have serious consequences in social justice work. If we have no control of what happens, why bother? When collectively we do have the influence to make a difference, to make a better world. I like to think of this as a paradox: we are in control and we are not in control. Little by little we can work together to change social structures and at the same time we cannot exactly control when we get our next job, or when we will experience the next sunny day...

If life is a series of all these times and seasons – What is the good news? Where is God?

One of the most powerful answers to this question I have heard is from the show, “Call the Midwife” when one of the nuns says, “God isn’t in the event. God is in the response to the event. In the love that is shown and in the care that is given.”²

No, we cannot control what tomorrow is going to look like, but we can be there for one another and let God’s love and care flow through us. There is always a time and a season for God’s response. There is always a time and a season for holding one another in God’s grace.

I see God’s response in Sadness’s care for Bing Bong.

I see God’s response in our homeless ministries- we recognized and celebrated here last week in worship. In Jim Stewart’s and the rest of First Shelter’s decision to rapidly transition to become a daytime and a nighttime refuge for guests. I see God’s response in Rev. Kate Layzer and all the volunteers of Friday Café serving 150 guests... or more than 300 on winter Fridays.

I see God’s response in Solutions at Work, a nonprofit working to end homelessness that some of our members here are involved in. who started a new shelter on Green Street in the midst of this pandemic.

I see God’s response in all our essential workers who continue to put their life on the line for all of us... healthcare workers and grocery store workers, emergency responders, teachers, flight attendants...

And I see God’s response in our Gospel passage today.

¹ Bible Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrsQ1tc-2wk>

² From the tv show, “Call the Midwife”

Jesus's identity is confirmed in his baptism just weeks ago as the Son of God and now his identity as the son of God is put to the test by Satan. He fasts for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. He is starving for food and water.

And Satan (who is hard for me to not imagine a big tall red dude with big horns on the side of his head appearing... the match.com commercial that pops up on Hulu every so often does not help). I know this is not accurate, but it's really hard to get that visual out of my head.

Anyway, we have Jesus and we have Satan or the tempter. The tempter says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

These temptations are not just unique to Jesus. We see these temptations in the Hebrew Bible when the Israelites escape slavery in Egypt. We see these temptations in our world today as we give into Satan with our greed for wealth, convenience, and power. Leading to economic and racial inequalities and a climate change crisis.

When Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus responds: "One does not live by bread alone, But by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

This is God's response. Thomas Long, a pastor and biblical scholar says that this answer to Satan's temptation does not imply that providing bread to feed human hunger is a bad thing, it is just not the only thing. The faithful do not live by one word, one need, one issue or one passion. Long says and I quote, "God speaks many words not just one...The whole word of God, which gives life."

God's response to Satan is a call to the whole. And a reminder that God is in the whole. God is not just in the response to hunger, but in the response to hate, to war, to loss.... To all of it. God is in our work and in our stillness. God is in our listening and in our speaking. And God is in our protest signs and in our demands for social change.

There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens and there is always a time and season for God's response.

Many of us started this Lenten journey with ashes on our foreheads. As part of our Lent season here at First Church, we will be reflecting on ashes and its rich symbolism. Ashes as a sign of creation. Ashes as a sign of mortality. Ashes as a sign of repentance and ashes as a sign of the cross.

As I think about ashes today, I am drawn to think about them as God's response -embodied- on our foreheads.

What does it mean that we wear these ashes? Some may argue public witness... or owning one's Christianity identity...or outward sign of inward repentance.

If we were to see these ashes as God's response to us... how would that change us? Would it?

I invite you to close your eyes with me and imagine God's response.

As we reflect on ashes as sign of creation, imagine God as a gardener watering and caring for a new growing seed, as an artist drawing and painting, as us -watching in awe and wonder as the sun rises once again.

As we reflect on ashes as a sign of mortality, imagine God as a loved one offering a shoulder to cry on, some warm soup and someone to just be with.

As we reflect on ashes as a sign of repentance, imagine God as this church embracing you with wide open arms and a smile.

And as we reflect on ashes as a sign of the cross, imagine the heavens opening up and whispering, "I will always be with you." Imagine the taste of a new day. Imagine a chance to start again. And again. And again.

Imagine all the ways God responds to you. In times of weeping and in times of laughing. In times of scattering stones and in times of collecting them.

Imagine all the ways God responds through you. In your love and care for yourself and for each other.

Imagine all the ways God responds through us as a church. As we gently hold one another. As we offer prayers.

As we reach out to comfort and support through our phones, computer screens, and socially distanced walks. As we face all the many seasons under the sun, as we journey through this season of Lent together... with many unknowns before us, as we turn and return to our scripture, may we find hope and grace knowing in every time, in every season, in every event, God is responding to us and through us. Thanks be to God.



