

*There is a time for everything,
 and a season for every activity under heaven:
 2 a time to be born and a time to die,
 a time to plant and a time to uproot,
 3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
 a time to tear down and a time to build,
 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
 a time to mourn and a time to dance,
 5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
 a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
 6 a time to search and a time to give up,
 a time to keep and a time to throw away,
 7 a time to tear and a time to mend,
 a time to be silent and a time to speak,
 8 a time to love and a time to hate,
 a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)*

There is a Time for Everything

Do you remember the old song by the Byrds entitled “Turn! Turn! Turn!”? Did you think of it while I was reading the text for this evening? If you’re above a certain age, you almost can’t hear this text without thinking of that song because most of the words of that song were stolen from the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, they used the King James translation instead of the NIV that we read in church, but they’re obviously the same words. When the Byrds sang these words, however, in 1965, they changed their meaning. After King Solomon’s words “A time for peace” they added the last line, “I hope it’s not too late.” They made this text from Ecclesiastes into a protest against the Vietnam War. That wasn’t what King Solomon was writing about. So what do these words mean? That’s what we want to explore this evening as the year 2010 winds up: **there is a time for everything.**

I.

There is a time for all that life here brings. Really? For everything this life brings? For sin and disobedience and selfishness? No, that’s not what Solomon means. He does not say there’s a time to be selfish and time to think about other people, or a time to get drunk and a time to stay sober – even though many today would say both of those things. So what does he mean? In a very poetic way – using fourteen pairs of contrasting terms – King Solomon is making an observation about our lives. There is a time for everything that we have to face in life.

And it’s no accident that each pair contrasts something good with something bad – a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to weep and a time to laugh. In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon is writing about what he calls “life under the sun” – life as we really face it in a sinful world. If you live “under the sun” – if you live in the world as it actually is today, you must face good and bad.

He talks about a time to plant and a time to uproot. He’s talking about the cycle of life. In the spring we plant. In fall we plow under the dead remains of those plants and let them become fertilizer. One year, you may spend enormous effort and expense planting hedges or trees or even an orchard. Another year, you rip them all out, because plans change and life goes on.

But Solomon also says there is time to kill and a time to heal. This moves us beyond the simple “cycle of life” idea. The Hebrew word translated as “kill” here almost never means slaughtering animals for food. Most of the time, it refers to warfare or even to violence. We face hardship and even hard choices as we try to live our faith. Christians sometimes have to go to war, as we’ve seen throughout this past year and the several years before it. So, Solomon moves on to a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. God designed us to have feelings. So when we suffer losses, when people we love die, we have to mourn and weep. In order to heal, we need to express our sorrow and loss, without accusing God of being

unfair. And likewise, when God sends blessings, he wants us to rejoice, to laugh and sing and even dance. God delights in the feelings he has given us.

But feelings are not only thing that Solomon is writing about. He's also writing about wisdom. All these things are going to come to us in their time, how will we react? He speaks of time to build and a time to tear down. My kids have always enjoyed legos. Sometimes, they've spent hours and hours making some creation. They may have kept that creation around for weeks at a time. But eventually the time came when they wanted to build something else. So they had to tear down the old so they could use the parts for the new. The same kind of thing happens to all of us, not with legos, of course, but with all that we build in our lives. Do we have to have the wisdom to know when it's time to build or keep on building what we've been working on and when it's time to tear down the old? When it's time to give up on something that we've invested enormous time and effort in, and move on to something else?

Solomon speaks of a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away. How often are we slaves of our possessions? We've lost something and we desperately want it back. Or emotionally, we can't accept that it's gone. My grandmother inherited her mother's jewelry, including her wedding ring. She always planned to give it to my mother. But when my mother was a little girl, my grandmother had a lady coming to help with the housework and she stole the gems out of that wedding ring. To this day, when my mother talks about that, you can tell that was a tough loss for her because of what her grandmother meant to her. How do we deal with a loss like that? Nothing here is permanent. But it's easy for us to obsess about what we've lost. Sometimes it's hard for us to throw away what needs to be thrown away. It takes wisdom to know what to keep and what to let go of.

It takes wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent. I often lack that wisdom. I know I talk way too much at meetings. Where does all this wisdom come from? The Scriptures say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. To know how best to manage our lives requires a heart that is dedicated first and foremost to the Lord. True wisdom is about serving. It's about love. It's about speaking not because either you like the sound of your own voice and being silent not because you're afraid of looking foolish, but speaking or being silent because that's the best way to serve the Lord and the people around you.

All of which really brings us to the last two sets of pairs: a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. Human wisdom says that if someone really hurts you, it's only natural to hate them. How could we condemn someone for hating a child molester? How could we condemn someone for hating a person who robbed them or killed someone they love? How could we condemn a wife for hating a husband who cheated on her and abandoned her and her children? But that's not Solomon's point. Even in those cases, God calls us to forgive. The New Testament says, **“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”** Solomon is not telling us to sin. God tells us to hate sin. God tells us to wage war against the devil and the forces of darkness. God tells us to hate all the weakness and lust that lives in our own sinful hearts. Just as there is a time when a Christian may have to fight a physical war and even try to kill his enemy, there is a time to wish that the sinner inside us were dead.

There is a time for everything under the sun. We live under God even while we live under the sun. The Lord is in control of our lives and he decides what times we have to face. He decides when it's a time to mourn or a time to dance. He brings blessing and sorrow. He brings outward peace and even outward strife, all according to what we need. Sometimes, what he brings is a direct response to our sinful choices and attitudes. Sometimes, what he brings serves a purpose that is deeper than anything we can see right now. But always he works for our spiritual good.

What time is it in your life? What will your response be? How often have we trusted God in the ups and downs? How often have we indulged our sinful hearts and raged against God or questioned his love? That sin betrays us. It shows how vigorous the unbeliever inside us really is. It shows how easily we all could abandon the Lord. But you know what? God already knows that. He sent his Son to die because we are weak. Jesus paid for that sinner inside us. Jesus paid for all that we are guilty of – for every angry question and every self-pitying tear, for every denial of God's love in a moment of hurt or confusion, for every sinful choice in the face of blessing or sorrow.. Jesus died and paid for it all. And he rose and wiped all that sin away forever.

The God who sent Jesus rules lives. And in love, he sends good and bad, joy and sorrow, times to build and times to tear down, times to love and times to hate, all for our eternal good. Every day, he is schooling us in trusting him. Every minute, he is guiding us to heaven.

II.

All of which is to say, **there is a time for everything. A time for all that our new life brings.** When God brought us to faith, he restarted our lives. The new life God gave us begins here, but it continues on into heaven. So Solomon is teaching us today to approach all that we face under the sun as children of God who trust him in joy and in sorrow. Now trust does not mean we can't cry. It does not mean we can't hurt and seek comfort from people we love when we hurt. But trust does mean that when we hurt, we cling to our Savior for the strength that only he can give us.

Trust gives us a new and different attitude, an attitude that understands the truth that Solomon is laying out for us. We are going to face all these things. Sometimes, it's going to be hard to figure out what is wisdom. Sometimes, we're going to struggle with hurt and difficulty. But we know that's what life is like under the sun. And we seek the Lord's wisdom every day as we struggle to reflect our faith in all those situations. We try to understand what time of our life it is today. If this is a time to tear down and give up and throw away, then we trust that God knows what he's doing by putting us there.

That trust then leads to action. Christian life is not fatalistic. We don't say, "Well, God's in control, so it doesn't matter what I do." Rather, faith says, "God's in control, but he's calling me to show love and to live my faith. He gives me choices and lets me decide how I'm going to serve him." Christian trusts actively looks for the best way to serve God in every situation.

And Christian faith understands that my new life only begins under the sun. It doesn't end here. In fact, it doesn't end at all. It goes on into eternity. What ends is life under the sun. All those pairs of good and bad will become singletons. Only the good will be left. When Christ returns and gives us the new heavens and the new earth, there will only be a time to live, only a time to laugh, only a time to dance and love and keep. The very first pair said, "There is a time to be born and a time to die." That's true here. And it reminds us that our real life isn't here at all. Our real life is with Christ. That life never dies. When we die, we join him. When we rise, we live with him in that new world without sadness or suffering or pain.

That's what Solomon wants us to see this evening. 2010 has only got a couple of hours left. 2011 will begin soon. What will the new year bring? Laughter or weeping? Planting or uprooting? Speaking or silence? Probably all of the above and even birth and death within our congregation. It may even bring the return of our Lord. But through it all, turn your hearts to the Lord so that you can face whatever he sends with faith and with wisdom. Trust in him and live a vigorous life of faith throughout the coming year. Amen.