Seasons in Our Lives

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; Mt 11:16-19

West Valley Presbyterian Church

January 1, 2023

1. It feels a bit strange to come in, the Sunday after Christmas, and not see Morgan, doesn’t it?

A. He is now in Saxe Gotha Presbyterian Church in Lexington, South Carolina; and with the 3 hour time difference, he’s probably finished leading the congregation in their first worship service together.

B. We are going to miss him. Especially you all, since you’ve known him longer than I have. Morgan is an excellent preacher and coach; he’s an excellent pray-er; he is kind; and a wonderful colleague. He had a big impact here. He helped this church through some rough wilderness, and helped us discover God’s path forward. I hope and pray that he will be as much of a blessing to Saxe Gotha as he has been for us.

2. And. I’m not Morgan. I’m Janet. You’ve heard me preach before, so you’ve probably noticed that my theology and preaching style are similar to Morgan’s. Which is true – they are. And also, in some ways I am different. For example, I don’t know yet how Things Should be Done Around Here. I need people to tell me! And, I’m older than Morgan. I was retired when we moved here. My husband Rob and I moved to San Jose to help with the grandchildren.

3. Congregations also are similar in some ways, and different in other ways. It takes a while to get to know one another, which is a good thing. Getting to know one another is an honor and a privilege.

4. As I was praying about which Bible passages would be especially helpful, at the beginning of both a new year and a new pastoral relationship, Ecclesiastes 3 came to mind, together with one of Jesus’ comments about God’s wisdom in Matthew 11.

SLIDE 1

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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,

SLIDE 2

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 to for war and a time for peace.

SLIDE 3

What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live.

SLIDE 4

That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

Whatever is has already been,

And what will be has been before;

And God will call the past to account.

SLIDE 5

Matthew 11: 16-19

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

 ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance;

 We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

SLIDE 6

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

4. I think Ecclesiastes is one of those books that we appreciate more, the more experience with life that we have. When I was younger, I wanted to go change the world; and Ecclesiastes seemed cynical, not very encouraging. Now that I am older, I appreciate Ecclesiastes’ wisdom a lot more. Now, like you, I’ve seen enough of life and death, joy and suffering, to know that yes, there is a time and a season for everything.

SLIDE 7

5. You’ve seen a lot too; if you’re older than I am, you’ve seen more. You also have experienced life and death, mourning and dancing, planting and uprooting, tearing down and rebuilding, scattering stones into a neat path or piling them together to build a fireplace. You also know that things don’t happen in a vacuum. You don’t mend a shirt unless it’s been torn, right? “A time to tear and a time to mend.” Or, “A time to be silent and a time to speak.” When you speak, it has to be balanced out with silence, at least a little. Even pastors don’t speak constantly. I have to be silent at least long enough to catch my breath, right?

6. There’s a time for everything; but, it takes wisdom to know what that time might be. It takes wisdom to know when to DO what, and when NOT to do what. And wisdom is something we gain through experience in our lives with God.

7. And so I think we can understand that there are seasons not only in our individual lives, but also in the life of our church. Sixty years ago, in the life of our church, it was a time to plant. Now it’s a time to replant, with a new church development starting on this property. Sixty years ago, we were all young families growing up together. Now it’s a time when we might be able to share what we have learned through the years, with other young families. There is a season for every activity under heaven.

8. There was a season for Pastor Kim to be here, and then for Pastor Morgan to come. There was a season for Pastor Morgan to accept another call, and a season for a retired pastor to come. We may not like change. We may get grumpy or discouraged about it. We may say, “Things were better when Pastor So and So was in charge.” But, change happens; so it’s good to be reminded that there is a time and a season for everything.

SLIDE 8

8. So, where is God in all of this change? According to Jesus - who should know - God is often doing things we don’t appreciate at the time!

A. For example, says Jesus, God sent John the Baptist, an ascetic, who wore skins belted around himself, who ate bugs, and wild honey when he could get it, and lived in the desert by the Jordan River. The only thing he asked of people is that they repent and be baptized as a sign of their repentance. And did the people say, “Wow, here’s someone who is really serious about God’s calling?” Nope; they said, “He has a demon.” He’s crazy.

B. And then God sent Jesus, who, although he was poor like most everyone else, was not an ascetic. He gladly ate and drank whatever he was given, with whoever invited him. And what he asked of people was a lot. He asked people to put everything aside and follow him. And did the people appreciate Jesus’ differences from John? Nope; they said, “This guy is a glutton and a drunkard who hangs out with the riffraff.”

C. Yet wisdom, says Jesus, “is proved right by her deeds.” We may not like what God is doing when we are in the midst of change. We may not appreciate it at the time. But we will appreciate it eventually. We will be able to look back and say, “Oh, yes, I understand now; I see what God has been doing all this time.”

SLIDE 9

9. And that’s what the rest of our Ecclesiastes passage tells us: what God is doing in the midst of the seasons of change.

A. v. 11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” Let’s take a close look at that verse:

a. “He has made everything beautiful” – when has he done this? Right now? No; “in its time.” There are seasons for everything. There is a time for everything. And God holds those seasons and times within himself to bring forth what is good and beautiful.

b. “He has also set eternity in the human heart” – Most animals are very much in the moment. My two dogs, for instance, don’t seem very interested in the ultimate fate of the universe. They are interested in getting their meals and their walks at their regular times. But humans do think about beginnings and endings, and we do wonder what happens after we die, and what the ultimate fate of the universe might be.

c. Yet, being mortal, we are not able to comprehend all that God has done. We were not there at the beginning of the universe; we probably won’t be there at the end of the universe either.

d. In other words, we can’t see the full scope of all that God has done and is doing, since we are limited creatures. But we can be assured that he is at work right now in this time, to redeem everything, to make it beautiful. As Jesus points out, we may not always appreciate what God is doing. But we can trust that he is doing what is best.

B. v. 14 confirms that. It reads, “I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.”

SLIDE 10

10. God has set things up, and God knows what he’s doing. So how should we respond?

Ecclesiastes tells us that too, vv. 12-13: “I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God.”

A. OK. That’s what we should be doing as a church, as God’s people here in this place, in the midst of change that we may or may not like. We should be happy and do good.

a. The good things we do for the community, like Refuge, and supporting the teachers at Hyde Middle School right next door to us, well, we should keep doing them. Because they ARE good.

b. And, the things that increase our happiness, we should do those things too. Just one example: the swimming parties that Janet and Greg Shaw hosted this past summer. Where we just got together and shared food, and talked with one another. Where we just enjoyed each other’s company.

c. That’s one of the things I noticed about the going away party that we had for Morgan two weeks ago. Yes, we were sad that he was leaving; and at the same time, we also really enjoyed just eating together and catching up with one another. There was so much laughter in the hall.

B. Yes, there will be change in the church. And this is the season for that. We’ve done our best to discern what God is doing in our midst by choosing to keep the church open, and also help a New Church Development to get going here.

C. In the meantime, in this season of our church’s life, how about if we just enjoy each other’s company? How about if we eat and drink together and find satisfaction in all our toil? How about if we are happy, and keep doing good? How about if we thank God for all that he has done, and is doing, and will do in the future? How about it? Amen? Amen!