

*Weeping & Laughing.* A sermon from the Ecclesiastes series, preached on January 22, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons; ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

I JOHN 3:13-17

A tune to begin this morning's reflection and consideration of the verses Al read from Ecclesiastes

*Turn, turn, Turn – The Byrds*

Let us pray

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our strength and redeemer. AMEN

Turn, turn, turn,--written originally in the late 50's by American folk singer, Pete Seeger,

The version we just listened to was done by the British band, The Byrds in 1965.

In an interview shortly before his death in 2014, Pete Seeger said that the Byrds version of his song was the best – better harmonization and richer.

Seeger, the Byrds or any others who sing it – this is poetry set to music

Its words and phrases are often cited – but they are not by any means modern

They are from the Bible

In 8 verses, the Preacher addresses both the reality  
of passing time in our lives

And what will be the content of that passing time.

Life says the Preacher is made up by a series of  
experiences –all of them important,

All of them to be entered into

All of life like a mosaic – little pieces of  
human experience common to us all, but lived  
uniquely by each of us

Or, Life is like a dance with movement, rather than  
a simple straight line with the occasional bump or  
hiccup.

Life has its own rhythms and movements

Sometimes the dance is fast – like hip hop

Sometimes slow and intimate-- like cheek to cheek

Sometimes grand and sweeping like a waltz

Sometimes complicated –like a tango

Sometimes simple –

That dance image is picked up on the  
serigraph done, yes, once again-- John Swanson.



Picture itself is framed by the form of a cathedral with illuminated windows that show or portray every portion of these first 8 verses of Ecclesiastes, As well as a zodiac of time forming what would be the rose window in a cathedral.

The astrology signs are not anti-Christian — they just allow us to look at time in a different way. It is a busy and yet wonderful picture is it not. And this picture, unlike the vanitas one of two weeks ago, I could live with in a public room in my home or in the office. This morning, I want to look at just one set of the 8 pairings in Ecclesiastes 3.

They are not the most important pairings, for it is clear that the Preacher does not list things in order of importance.

First though, some general observations about time and living that the Preacher gives.

First,

*These are words written by someone of more mature years and experience – spiritual and other.*

I cannot speak for each of you, but this is a text that has more meaning to me now, than it was when either I first heard it in church or first hummed and mouthed the lyrics and tune of Turn, Turn, Turn. For both happened in the early '60's.

Ecclesiastes 3 was a sometime text preached at St. Andrew's – and it was the only text preached from Ecclesiastes!

So, though I have known the words for some time, When I first heard them, I knew what the words meant,

But I had little life experience and insight as to their meaning

Even yet, and I am much older now – the verses continue to bring me up short and cause me to say – wow! That's right! It is so!

Such insight comes from a writer of mature and experiences of life person.

Second general observation – *the Preacher understands that TIME plays a central role in everyone's life.*

That is, each of us gets 24 hours every day.

We cannot carry over or bank hours can we.

No matter how hard we may wish it to be so, we know there will never be more than 24 hours in a day

We only get one opportunity to use each minute we have – once it has passed, it is gone forever.

How then are we going to live – given these pairing realities of verses 1-8?

Third general observation. *The Preacher is inviting us by his words to see life and living with a long view perspective.*

Long view does not dismiss the nasty, or cover up the unwanted, unexpected, unnecessary, and unwarranted of life

The Preacher says, there will be such times – and he says it quite graphically and bluntly in vs.1-8

But the Preacher also reminds his readers that all time – our times, the world's times are in God's hands.

### **A time for every matter under heaven**

Do you get it says the Preacher?

Everything in the lives of each of us – from the day or our being born to the day we shall be absent from the body and present with the Lord is in the hands of God!

The tyranny of the immediate that so often encompasses and threatens to stifle, discourage or wear us down tends to make us see a fraction of God's plan as the only thing in play.

Ecclesiastes says,,, you cannot ignore or stone face the immediate,

But remember the big picture, the wider view, the longer perspective – we are in God's hands, no matter what we may be experiencing at the present moment.

And God is not bound by the 24 hour clock –  
chronos

His time is His time – kairos...

The truth that God not only sees and knows the bigger picture, but is in control of is both mysteriously awesome and hopes giving.

For God is a generous and gracious God...

To come back to Ecclesiastes 3 – verse 4

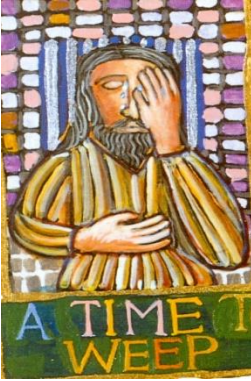
**For everything there is a season, and a time for  
everything under heaven**

**Vs, 4 – a time to weep and a time to laugh**

Here are the pairings on the painting.

They are also on your bulletin cover.

**A time to weep**



–picture of a man weeping – I wonder if Swanson is thinking of the Exodus?

I wonder if the real exile of Israel in Egypt was that they had learned to endure it.

Certainly the Exodus was a time of weeping – what was in Egypt, the uncertainty of leaving the familiar – however nasty the familiar and the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

A time to weep.

Never.

I don't like this one you say

Me neither.

So why tarry with this first of the pairing  
Particularly in this good time world – or so  
advertisers harp upon

Weeping is for the unstable, the whiners, those who  
just can't cut it.

We don't want to spend time talking about pain –  
we would rather avoid it.

Are those not voices heard in the world?

The difficulty is though grief and things about which one can only weep do surface in our lives. Tears will fall despite the fact that we resist them so strongly

Weeping and wailing are so evident today – and you do not have to look either hard or far to see situations that ought to cause us to weep.

I heard it in the speakers at the March of the Women on Washington yesterday.

Weeping and wailing --from the unemployed and underemployed who want the basics they cannot have;

From the divorced and abandoned who cannot cope with what they do have;

From the sick and the lonely who feel they have nothing to live for at all;

From the powerless whose lives are essentially faceless and unrecognized;

From the privileged and well to do who have it all and still have nothing that really satisfies.

There are times in our lives when all we can do is weep.

I therefore wonder why it is that so many of us hesitate to weep and lament – not only in our heads – but outwardly

I wonder why so many of us put on masks that convey – ‘everything is just fine’

I wonder – do we think we are somehow letting down the side – whatever that side is



Do we think that to weep shows that we cannot cope and are weak.

Should we just buck up and get on with life for Jesus.

I had an elder say that to me shortly after my Dad died in June 1984. I told her that I was still feeling exhausted, sad and disoriented.

Her response – ‘Herb, just buck up and do it for Jesus’.

I did not have the wit then – probably wise I did not to remind this person that the scriptures recorded that Jesus wept on at least two occasions – upon learning of the death of his friend Lazarus  
And over the city of Jerusalem as he approached it for the final time before his crucifixion!

To deny that times of weeping are part of our lives is just plain wrong!

Ecclesiastes says so,

And so do modern day health care and Pastoral care experts .

If we do not weep, we will never understand fully how human and fragile we really are.

Further, we will over time cut ourselves off from the pain in this world and in our lives.

To weep is to be honest

It is to open ourselves to the healing power of God in Jesus Christ.

The ancients often spoke about “the gift of tears’.

Often tears or weeping help us have the heart to care about what we do to others

Those who weep know that all life matters!

Every life is precious and unique

Loss and grief of any sort is painful

And sometimes all one can do is to weep!!!

### A time to laugh



Swanson’s image is that of a jester – ancestor of the modern day clown.

A familiar figure in the Middle Ages –the jester was the one who was able to poke fun at those who thought themselves legends in their own mind and those who never met a mirror they didn’t like

Ecclesiastes would not include in this **time to laugh** – ridicule passed off as wit

Ethic jokes, racial slurs and jeering at physical limitations

Such are merely venom thinly put forth as humour.

No, what Ecclesiastes is calling his readers to do is “lighten up” Laugh a little...for there is much about which to laugh....

What a necessary corrective to believers who enter a room and by their faces, and body language, you feel like it is going to rain in the room.

These are the sort of people who could single-handedly take the smile off the face of clowns.

And if they are Presbyterians, then they fit the traditional and very wrong assumption that Presbyterians never commit a pleasure.

Laughter liberates and laughter uplifts does it not?

When laughter comes into a life, nothing is impossible,

Nothing is too difficult,

Nothing can defeat us.

Laughter is always grace.

Will everyone laugh uproariously and punch the shoulder of the person nearest them or slap their own knees – no.

I for one have often been told I do not laugh enough – to which I often reply now – “this is my happy face”

**A time to laugh.** *Beware then of those who brand any sort of light heartedness or laughter particularly in church – as buffoonery or an offence to the holiness of God.*

These people are like a chair seat covered in coarse sandpaper – sitting on the chair won't kill you, but it sure is uncomfortable.

Offence to the holiness of God??? Really – Sarah laughed, God laughed, the Book of Proverbs talks a lot about laughter.

*Beware of those who are preoccupied with perfection for if your overriding and single goal in life is perfection – then nothing fun will ever be allowed into your soul.*

For if you take anything lightly, you may discover that you are not perfect. You are very human and that's okay! And perfection does not allow for human error or weakness.

*Laugh with small children.* It will restore your delight in the fundamental things of life.

*Laugh at anything pompous.* Each of us really is a little lower than the angels.

*Most of all, laughter is healthy when we are able to laugh at ourselves.* For each of us are mortal and so human. Mistakes are made – sometimes unintentional and they become wonderfully delightful memories.

If Jane were here this morning, she would know the story I am about to tell for a group of young people dissolved into fits of laughter and giggles when I unintentionally said something

during one Christmas eve without noticing the double meaning my words carried.

You remember before we built the manger scene on Christmas Eve, we hung various Christmas ornaments on the tree.

One of those ornaments was walnuts painted in Gold symbolizing the wood for the Cross of Christ and gold as a royal colour.

What I ought to have said to the congregation was those of you, who have golden walnuts, you can bring them forward to hang on the tree.

What I said was “those of you who have gold nuts come forward and hang them on the tree.”

As soon as I said it, I saw faces that conveyed – herb did not just say what I think he said.

And I could hear laughter from the balcony.

Not to add to the quiet giggles and smiling faces now abroad in the congregation, I just moved ahead.

But at the door, Jane and her friends came to me with tears stained faces from laughter and keeping it all as quiet as they could.

Do you know what you said Dad – Yes, I know all too well.

One of Jane’s friends said it was the most memorable Christmas Eve service had ever attended – because it was so obvious that I had made such an unintentional mistake in wording.

The following year, this same person asked before the service, were we hanging golden nuts again? No, I said, we have moved on to something different!

I laughed about the mistake then; I quietly smile about it now.

Stop taking yourselves too seriously – laugh at yourself occasionally – that in part is what Ecclesiastes is saying.

**A time to weep, and a time to laugh.**

Like all the pairings in Ecclesiastes 3, they remind us that life is not even,

Nor is it smooth.

There is rhythm and movement.

There will be weeping and unpleasant times in our lives.

Such times will often come at the most inopportune and inconvenient times to us.

However, there shall be times of laughter.

Moments that will make us acutely aware of how great it is to be alive,

In the company of others and enjoying God's gift and grace of laughter.

*To everything, turn, turn, turn  
There is a season, turn, turn, turn  
And a time to every purpose under heaven.*