

## Transitions

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

Time keeps moving along. Living in Marin County, I can sometimes forget about seasons. It feels like perpetual spring, where things are blooming year round. And I love that. But autumn is my season. I love crisp fall days, sweater weather. When I lived in Eugene, Oregon and Bloomington, Indiana and Scotch Plains, New Jersey, I felt that thrill of fall days and the beauty of so many trees full of yellow, orange and reds. The experience the seasons were changing.

The church has seasons, liturgical seasons, that reflect a rhythm of celebrating holy days. I have always liked that rhythm. You may be aware of these seasons or not. Our church - Worship Committee and Liturgical Arts committee - uses the liturgical calendar to help our congregation experience aspects of this rhythm of seasons and different spiritual practices and themes throughout the year. Different parts of the Bible and stories about the prophets, Jesus, the early church.

Here is the liturgical calendar. There are colors associated with it. We have been using blue and purples for Advent. You can see that Advent is the first season of the church year – Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Ordinary Time.

This year 2023 – the way the dates fell on the Gregorian calendar – 12 months, 365 days a year. This year the first Sunday of Advent is next Sunday, Dec. 3. It often falls on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. There are 4 Sundays of Advent. Time feels a little different this year.

So this week the Liturgical Arts Committee will get everything ready for next Sat. for our Deck the Halls – transform the sanctuary and chapel and Canoles - for Advent – the season before Christmas – blue and purple fabrics, trees, wreaths, lights. It will be clear a new season has been ushered in even if it is still in the 70's outside! Changes in color, in music, in focus, in readings and scripture passages.

But today, what time is it? What season is it? It is a transition Sunday – end of the church year. For some Christ the King or the Reign of Christ. The Worship Committee and I chose a different focus. Transitions in time, in our spiritual lives, in the world.

The familiar passage from Ecclesiastes suggests that there is a rhythm of life. After these past few months, I struggle with the last line – a time for war and a time for peace. It is always time for peace, for diplomacy, for finding another way instead more killing. This passage was probably written down around 450 BCE during Babylonian exile. It was a tribal world. War must have seemed inevitable. For some it appears so today, but it is worth asking deeper questions.

The book of Ecclesiastes is usually called “skeptical” Wisdom. The author of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher, is a sage who has lived long and has grown a bit weary of life’s ups and downs. Like the author of Proverbs, the Teacher recognizes a certain reliable order that God has put in creation, a time and a season for everything (3:1-8). And the Teacher advocates humility. We are to recognize our own mortality in the face of God’s eternity and stand in awe [literally, “fear”] in the presence of the Holy One. (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

This should lead us to live lives of humility and to a proper delight in the gifts of God. Time is precious and finite. Don’t waste time.

What time is it? And how do we make transitions from one time in our life to another, from one season to another?

We can say that time rolls along. In most of the bookstores and office supply stores, the 2024 calendars are for sale. Some of us still love paper calendars. Many of us have calendars on our phones. Having a calendar gives can give us hope as we make plans for the future. Look forward to something. Measuring time. And yet be open to what each day will bring.

We can also say time runs out. Talking to a friend whose son is a senior in high school. The Common App essays for college are due by January 1. That is the deadline. I remember those days. There are deadlines when time runs out, when a door closes. Sometimes we need that reminder – do what is needed before the deadline. Sometimes having that in front of us can motivate us to take action or let that door close.

We can reflect on how time offers us gift as we age – gifts and challenges. We can both laugh and lament about what time means as we live our lives in our 40’s, 50’s, 60’s, 70’s, 80’s and 90’s. One of the people who offers wisdom is Anne Lamott. Here is an excerpt from one of her recent essays

Getting older is almost like changing species, from cute middle-aged, white-tailed deer, to yak. We are both grass eaters, but that’s about the only similarity. At the Safeway..., I look

at the teenage girls in their crop tops with their stupid flat tummies and I feel bad about what lies beneath my big, forgiving shirts but — and this is one of the blessings of aging — not for long. Aging has brought a modicum of self-compassion, and acceptance of what my husband and I call “the Sitch”: the bodily and cognitive decline that we all face sooner or later.

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So many indignities are involved in aging, and yet so many graces, too. The perfectionism that had run me ragged and has kept me scared and wired my whole life has abated. The idea of perfectionism at 60 is comical when, like me, you’ve worn non-matching black flats out on stage. In my experience, most of us age away from brain and ambition toward heart and soul...(1)

We can see the paradoxes of time – finite and yet infinite. Our time on this earthly plain ends. We do not live forever. And yet there is an eternal life and hope in the Mystery we call God.

What time is it? How do we manage transitions and change in our hearts and bodies? How do we stay in the present moment? We can focusing on each moment on what we can see to take the next step.

Elizabeth Gilbert suggests that one way we can focus on the present. In her book, Big Magic: Living a Creative Life Beyond Fear, Gilbert notes that in living our life, folk often ask “What’s your passion?” – but that might be too broad, or too lofty, or inaccessible.

She says that the more interesting question is, “What is making you curious right now?” And she says, Go there. Go find out more. See where it leads you. What new question arises in you? Her point is that curiosity pushes us beyond what we know now – beyond our fear – beyond what we’ve experienced so far – into what we have yet to experience, and learn, and become. Curiosity pulls us out into what we don’t know, question by question, step by step.

Curiosity seems timely as we stand on the threshold of a new season of Advent. In this season, what are you curious about? What questions are you bringing into the seasons of Advent and Christmas? Questions for each one of us, and questions for us together. What kind of abundance and connection might we as a congregation offer people in our community?

In this transition time, this liminal time, this time feels like a threshold. I have thought quite a bit about thresholds over the last few years as we have explored different aspects of Celtic Christian spirituality. Here is some wisdom from John O’Donohue

At any time you can ask yourself: At which threshold am I now standing? At this time in my life, what am I leaving? Where am I about to enter? What is preventing me from crossing my next threshold? What gift would enable me to do it? A threshold is not a simple boundary; it is a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms and

atmospheres. Indeed, it is a lovely testimony to the fullness and integrity of an experience or a stage of life that it intensifies toward the end into a real frontier that cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up. At this threshold a great complexity of emotions comes alive: confusion, fear, excitement, sadness, hope.

To acknowledge and cross a new threshold is always a challenge. It demands courage and also a sense of trust in whatever is emerging. This becomes essential when a threshold opens suddenly in front of you, one for which you had no preparation. This could be illness, suffering or loss. Because we are so engaged with the world, we usually forget how fragile life can be and how vulnerable we always are. It takes only a couple of seconds for a life to change

No threshold need be a threat, but rather an invitation and a sacred promise....Whatever comes, the great sacrament of life will remain faithful to us, blessing us always with visible signs of invisible grace. (2)

Time rolls along, time is precious, time offers us gifts we may not expect. We are invited to be present as we wait in this threshold of time and seasons, know God is with us, in us, around us, holding us. As we move through the fall, as we move into Advent, it is a season of waiting and expecting. Close with a beautiful poem.

### **Waiting** by Macrina Wiederkehr

Slowly

she celebrated the sacrament of letting go.

First she surrendered her green,

then the orange, yellow, and red

finally she let go of her brown.

Shedding her last leaf

she stood empty and silent, stripped bare.

Leaning against the winter sky

she began her vigil of trust.

Shedding her last leaf

she watched its journey to the ground.

She stood in silence

wearing the color of emptiness,

her branches wondering;

How do you give shade with so much gone?

And then,

the sacrament of waiting began.  
The sunrise and sunset watched with tenderness.  
Clothing her with silhouettes  
they kept her hope alive.

They helped her understand that  
her vulnerability,  
her dependence and need,  
her emptiness,  
her readiness to receive  
were giving her a new kind of beauty.  
Every morning and every evening they stood in silence  
and celebrated together  
the sacrament of waiting.

- 1) Anne LaMott, "It's good to remember: We are all on borrowed time," Washington Post 10.30.23  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/30/aging-health-strength-mind-heart/>
- 2) John O'Donohue, From *To Bless the Space Between Us*, by John O'Donohue