

To Everything a Season
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
October 24, 2021

Reading – Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
³a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Sermon

As some of you may recall, I've returned from time to time to the biblical book of Ecclesiastes in my preaching – in fact preached on it just last year. And we've sung Pete Seeger's adaptation of the opening verses of chapter three of Ecclesiastes on many occasions – as we will later this morning.

I first read Ecclesiastes one summer in the Adirondacks during my camp councilor years. It resonated for me then and it has resonated for me in all the years since.

Interesting that this book clearly written by an older man (a man of privilege who had lived a long life, experimenting, as the text makes clear, with seeking meaning in life through all the usual routes: pleasure, power, prestige, work)... interesting that Ecclesiastes resonated with me as a callow youth, not yet out of college, having had very little time or opportunity to experiment, if that's the right word, in all those ways.

But his words did strike chords. Very similar to the chords struck by Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, which I had also read at about the same time, first on my own, then in an introductory philosophy seminar with Professor Gangadean, that charismatic teacher of mine who many of you met on Zoom last spring. Well, the character Siddhartha also tried all those usual paths seeking meaning and happiness, only to discover in the end peace and meaning as a humble ferryman (good metaphor there by the way!).

As for the writer of Ecclesiastes, variously known as “teacher” or “preacher”? He seems to have eventually found peace through the admonition to enjoy all the *simple* gifts of life given us: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil...” knowing, as he also wrote, that life is short, a “vanity,” which is a poor translation of the Hebrew which means something like a breath of wind, brief, transient. (It was in this spirit that I once preached a sermon about Ecclesiastes I titled “The Bible’s Hidden Buddhist.”)

Anyway, all this is by way of musing on this fact that this ancient book has resonated for me – as it does for many – during all the seasons of my life up till now, as, at the biblical age of three score and ten, I’ve begun, shall we say, a later season.

And this resonating, I think, is because the message, though penned by a man from that later season of life, is a message that is indeed relevant to every season.

This is where those well-known verses from chapter three of Ecclesiastes come in.

You see, the old man had lived long enough to observe that life has natural seasons, has ebbs and flows, has a natural time for this and then the time for that – not one thing in contradiction to another, but rather part of a rhythm. We plant, then eventually we pluck up what is planted; we laugh when it is appropriate to laugh, and we weep when it is appropriate to weep. And so it goes, as he observed offering wise counsel for those in earlier seasons of their lives than his.

As if to say, for example, don’t worry that your weeping will go on forever, for there *will* be a time to laugh again. As if to say mourn when it is time to mourn, but don’t fear that you will never dance again. As if to say, pay attention: sometimes it is right to speak and sometimes better to keep silent.

And so on.

Well, I don’t know about you, but for me this perspective, this reminder of the natural rhythms of life has always brought a measure of peace, throughout the seasons of my life.

This said, there is another part of the message from this old man, teacher, preacher, that I take some issue with.

Right at the outset of his book, he says, complains as it seems, that there is nothing new under the sun, that everything just repeats, workers gain nothing for their toil, all is vanity. Here are his words:

All things are wearisome;
 more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
 or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
 and what has been done is what will be done,
 there is nothing new under the sun.

Depressed yet? But remember... this is where he begins, not where he ends. Begins by expressing one of the many seasons of the soul, so to speak. After all, it may be that we have all felt this way sometimes. But it is not where he ends, and not where I would end.

If the preacher/teacher *had* stopped there, I'm not sure the book would have made it into the Bible, and even if it had, I don't know that I would have found it inspiring or grounding!

But he didn't stop there.

Rather, he eventually got around to affirming, as I've already noted, the good in our simple daily lives of working, eating, drinking.

Further – here's where I take a little issue with that ancient writer – unlike him, I would affirm that there *are* new things under the sun. Maybe the natural laws of life don't change, the fundamentals still apply (as the old song has it)... but always in fresh ways.

Look – I have my routines which don't change much from day to day. I wake early, I run, I have pretty much the same breakfast and the same tea every morning; I even sit in the same chair for that part of my morning as I read a bit and write a bit. Nothing new under the sun for me?

But here's the thing: Each morning, speaking of the sun, the sunrise offers a different array and arrangement of colors. The feeling of the atmosphere varies day to day. Each morning during this season the colors of autumn have changed a bit and sometimes more than a bit just overnight. Each morning I read something different, hear some fresh message. Each morning I write something different, some fresh reflection, sometimes surprising myself with some rising thought.

Anyway... how boring it would be to think that we won't be surprised by something at some point in the day (not to mention in a year or in a season of our lives).

Last week I shared a couple of lines from Richard Powers' new book, *Bewilderment*, a work of fiction set in the not-too-distant future:

Earth had two kinds of people: those who could do the math and follow the science, and those who were happier with their own truths. But in our hearts' daily practice... we all lived as if tomorrow would be a clone of now.

Powers was writing – and last week I was speaking – in the context of the climate crisis. But I think the message applies to just about every dimension of our lives. We too easily fall into habits and routines that can blind us to the freshness of each moment – and as Thich Nhat Hanh has written: “If you miss the present moment, you miss your appointment with life. That is very serious.”

So let me draw towards a conclusion by bringing all that I've said thus far to a little more reflection not on moments but on seasons, in particular seasons of our lives.

First: Just as we do well *not* to assume that “tomorrow will be a clone of now,” it is also a life-enriching practice not to assume that one season of our lives will just be a continuation of the previous – sure, eventually with a few more grey hairs and wrinkles, but more or less the same.

Instead, taking our cue from just about every tradition and culture as well as from western psychology, why not learn to honor each season of our lives for what it is, what it brings to us and what we bring to it.

As far as the first season of childhood goes, most children seem quite naturally to take life as it comes and give back what is theirs to give – in the form of enthusiasm, laughter and tears, curiosity, their own unique personalities and gifts, and so on.

As we enter adolescence and young adulthood, we, again quite naturally, likely find ourselves exploring different paths into the future, circumscribed in varying degrees by our social circumstances. And just as naturally we may sometimes be plagued during this season of our lives with doubts and worries about the future: what will we do, who will we be with, where will we live, and so on. All of which just comes with the seasonal territory – all normal, all human. To everything a season.

Then comes middle adulthood, including what we call middle age. In the Hindu pattern of life this is named the householder stage. But by whatever name it is most often for most of us a season of doing our best to earn a living, support ourselves in the world, perhaps support a family, practice a trade or career and/or manage a household. So for most it is a full to the brim season of toil and sometimes trouble, and perhaps a time of fewer opportunities for reflection or contemplation than we might like. But again, all coming with the seasonal territory – normal, human. To everything a season.

Then comes the transition to what some call “elderhood” – which might include retirement from whatever work we’ve been doing; and if we are fortunate more time for reflection and contemplation, perhaps more time as well to expand on what had been just a hobby or to pursue volunteering that suits our gifts, caring for others, doing more if we can to help heal our hurting world from a place of life-earned wisdom.

All as physically we slow down... because we have no choice. The replacement cells just don’t work as efficiently as the originals. Yet if we accept that this is the case, this later season as we approach and live beyond three score and ten, can be a season of beginning to let go of ceaseless striving, to let go of any attachment to our more youthful selves, to let go more fully into life, into each moment, each day, each season.

But whatever our season of life, may we remember that “to everything a season” is how things are... and that there are blessings to be found in each season, even in the midst of trial and trouble (which may sometimes be very hard indeed, it must be said), blessings if we do our best to awaken each day to the surprise of whatever the new day might bring.

So may it be.