

A Well-Seasoned Life
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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On New Year's Eve we are poised between old and new.

As we end one year today and begin a new year tomorrow, we are all very aware, I think, that there is a natural rhythm to the world that God has created, a natural rhythm to life. Every life has its seasons.

Listen to how Sue Ann Morrow, the Associate Dean of the chapel at Princeton, describes it:

Psychiatrists tell us, she says, life begins with the pain of separation at birth and continues on in myriads of ways throughout our lives, repeating itself over and over again with different intensity.

Do you remember, she asks, being tugged by the hand through the nursery school door, wondering if your mother was soon to abandon you into the hands of those ladies you didn't know? All the blocks and finger paints, the fire engines and crayons, laid out to make the moment easier, do not fool you at the age of four, and so, you let out a life-shattering scream.

But then you adjust; you topple down the years through reading, writing, and arithmetic, through soccer, Gulliver's Travels, and your first kiss, until it's time for college.

You feel cocky and confident enough in your khakis and Lacoste, energetically unloading the station wagon full of

books, CDs, your computer, a photograph of your summer love, a tin of grandmother's chocolate chip cookies, clothes, other essential stuff. You feel confident and ready enough... UNTIL...that station wagon begins to drive off, and you are left standing there with a great lump in your throat.

It is the poignancy of parting. So many goodbyes: the all too-abrupt end of a splendid summer; kissing your father as you start down the aisle; leaving a position, or a person who meant the whole world to you; leaving a house, a town, a season of your life.

It's what the Scriptures have proclaimed for centuries: There is a natural rhythm to creation. Every life has its seasons. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to get and a time to let go.

Every life has its seasons. I was thinking about this yesterday as we were flying back to Memphis from spending the week at Heidi's mom's in Scottsdale. We've never lived close to either of our sets of parents, so we have flown with our kids many, many times—from just a few weeks after Sam was born up until now.

So yesterday I was thinking about how easy it is to fly now with the kids. They just sit in the seats and read and drink their drinks and maybe play a handheld video game. At one point I looked down the row, and all four of us were reading.

It didn't use to be like that. I remember one time flying to Scottsdale for Christmas when Ivy was about a year and a half and Sam was four and a half. We had to lug all our Christmas

presents and all that stuff as well as all the baby stuff for Ivy. You have to figure we're probably going to forget something we need.

We get on the plane and get all settled. Sam's next to the window, Heidi's in the middle seat holding Ivy, and I'm on the aisle. Then we realized the thing we forgot was diapers. We didn't have any diapers in the bag; just the one Ivy was wearing. We figure it'll be OK as long as she doesn't go "#2". Heidi's mom will have diapers at home, so it shouldn't be that big of a deal.

Well, we go about an hour, and Heidi says, *Great*. And I begin to smell the problem. What are you going to do? You've got about an hour and a half left on the plane. You've got a dirty diaper. And you have no extra diapers.

Well, Heidi gets up and takes her to the bathroom; I don't know what she's going to do. She comes back a few minutes later, and Ivy looks like she's got about a roll of toilet paper stuffed in her pants. Actually, Heidi cleaned her up and stuffed these two rags we had in the bag in Ivy's pants.

We sat there for a minute and just laughed. It looked about as bad as it was ineffective. There was no way that was going to work.

About that time we spotted a lady waiting in line at the front of the plane to go into the restroom. She was holding a baby. I said, *Should I go ask her if we can borrow a diaper?* I guess you don't really borrow a diaper. Heidi, of course, urged me on to do it. I don't know why I'm always the one that has to do things like that.

I sat there for a minute and tried to think if there was any other way, but I couldn't come up with anything, so I walked up there to the front and said, *Hi. Uhh. I'll give you a thousand dollars for a diaper*. She kind of laughed and said, sure, I could have one. I thanked her profusely, but didn't mention the thousand dollars again.

I remembered all of that yesterday on the plane as we sat there with our two "big kids". And I remembered the truth that every life has its seasons. And you know that to be true as well in your own life.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, who calls himself "the Teacher", was trying to understand the meaning of life based on the experiences he had in his own particular life and the experiences of those around him.

The *New Interpreters Bible* says that *Ecclesiastes* is best viewed as a notebook of ideas by a philosopher/theologian about the downside and upside of life.

He tells us that he applied his mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven (1:12). Though it comes early in his book, these verses from chapter 3 are a good summary of his conclusions.

His conclusion is that God has set every event in life into its own appointed time. That is the primary observation the Teacher makes. Every matter of life comes and goes according to a plan set in motion by God. The episodes of life come and go, good and bad alike: birth and death, killing and healing, silence and speaking, love and hate.

As the Teacher sees it that is the way life simply is, for better or worse. He has seen enough of life to recognize the pattern, and to sense the inevitability of it, too.

This is kind of a hard book of the Bible to preach on. From the very beginning people have argued that Ecclesiastes does not belong in the biblical canon.

The writer is basically a realist; maybe you would even say a cynic. He is not at all comfortable with the platitudes of religion or even with conventional wisdom. He has no use at all for shallow piety or unexamined assumptions. He cuts through presumption and pretension.

It's a hard book to preach on. In fact, I never have preached from this before other than a wedding one time.

Here is the best way, I think, for us to understand the book of Ecclesiastes and what it is saying to us. From his vantage point, the Teacher looked at life and saw just how much he could not see. He understood just how much he did not understand of the ways and means of God.

He did have enough spiritual wisdom to discern that, for all of its ups and downs, good and bad, life was to be enjoyed with gratitude and endured with grace. And so, the Teacher brings us to the place where we recognize the way life is, where we admit our limited role in it, and where we worship the God who makes it all come into being.

[for some of these insights into Ecclesiastes, thanks to The Rev. Dr. Jack W. Baca, Senior Pastor, The Village Community Presbyterian Church, Rancho Santa Fe, California]

That's not everything we need to know about God or the Christian life—if the only book in the Bible we had was Ecclesiastes, we wouldn't be in very good shape, but it is one important piece.

So the Teacher recognizes the way life is, that every life has its seasons.

You might find this hard to believe, but one of the things I have enjoyed since moving to Memphis 3 and a half years ago is the change in seasons. You have to understand that we moved here from a small town in southeast Texas where there were only two seasons: hot and hot with giant mosquitoes.

Here in Memphis, there is summer, of course, when it is very hot and humid, but coming from southeast Texas, it's not so bad. There is a fall where the weather gets a little nicer and the leaves turn colors and fall. There's winter when it can get pretty cold from time to time. And there is my favorite season here, which is spring, when it begins to warm up and the trees and bushes blossom forth in beautiful colors.

Mixed in with the beauty of spring, though, is the reality of allergies, which I have also had to learn to deal with as a seasonal phenomenon.

Life as a series of seasons is a wonderful way to think about life. In my own experience with seasons in Memphis, I think I can point to several things that are true about the seasons of the year and also true about the seasons of life.

One, seasons come and go of their own accord. You can't make a season happen. When you're suffering in the cold of

winter, you can't make the sun come out and warm the earth just because you want it to. You have to fashion a life in the season in which you find yourself and live fully in that season and be thankful for what that season brings to you.

Two, every season is a mixture of good and bad. I love the warmth and color of spring in Memphis, especially if it follows a cold winter. But I hate the allergy problems that those dogwoods and other flowering trees bring. The pollen, which by its very nature carries the prospect of new beauty, also causes discomfort. Every season carries with it a mixture of good and bad, pleasure and pain.

And third, the season that we are currently in is richer and has more meaning because of the previous seasons we have lived through. This is what I like about Memphis as compared to southeast Texas—the warmth and color of spring has meaning because I've been through the cold of a real winter. When you've been through a true winter, when the sun finally does come out... now that's something special. And when you've been through a hot summer, the coolness of autumn takes on a whole new meaning.

So, tomorrow is January 1. In one way or another, I guess we are all entering into a new season in our lives.

And it is a season that has come upon us. You didn't all by yourselves create this season in your lives, but you are now committing to fashioning a life in this season in which you find yourselves.

And of course, we have to be realistic, this season of our lives, like the other seasons of your life you have lived through, will

also be a mixture of good and bad, pleasure and pain. But of course the irritating pollen of spring is what makes the flowers possible.

And this season of your life that you are in is richer and has more meaning because of the previous seasons that you have experienced. That's one of the things that makes it so special.

We are poised today, New Year's Eve, between old and new. And we know that just like in our past, in our future as well there will be...

A time to build...a time to tear down;
A time to plant...a time to plow;
A time to move...a time to wait;
A time to encourage...a time to be encouraged

There is...

A time for enemies...a time for friends;
A time for friends...a time for loneliness;
A time to console...a time to be consoled;
A time for rejection...a time for acceptance;
A time to be betrayed...a time to be befriended;
A time to minister...a time to be ministered to.

There is...

A time for action...a time for reflection;
A time for confusion...a time for clarity;
A time of doubt...a time of faith;
A time of bewilderment...a time of insight;
A time to ponder...a time to act.

There is...

A time to grow...a time to decline;
A time to weaken...a time to strengthen;
A time to suffer...a time to heal;
A time to begin...a time to end.

There is...

A time to question...a time to affirm;
A time for resentment...a time for reconciliation;
A time for success...a time for failure;
A time for recognition...a time for anonymity.

There is...

A time for frustration...a time for joy;
A time to cry...a time to rejoice;
A time to grieve...a time to move on.

There is...

A time for strength...a time for weakness;
A time to hold...a time to fold;
A time to resist...a time to accept;
A time to seize...a time to release;
A time to control...a time to let go;
A time to lead...a time to follow.

Lord, I know...

There is a time for me...
Lead in your time, Lord.

Help me discern your ways... and your time.

But most of all...

May I always be your servant
In your time, Lord.

Lord, in your time there is always...
a time for strength,
a time for hope,
a time for life.

Lord, in your time...

Use me... and I will lead...
Call me...and I will follow...
Lord, all this I will do...
In your time.

*[this prayer is adapted from There Is A Time: Reflections for
Leaders by Thomas F. Fischer]*