



“He has made everything beautiful in its time.”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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In our last sermon on Ecclesiastes we ended on a positive note. And indeed, every sermon should end on a positive note because the Bible not only deals with what is wrong in the world and in our lives, it also gives the solution in Jesus Christ and so there is always hope. There is always a way forward. That is the good news. The only place of utter despair in biblical perspective is hell. So last time we ended on a note of joy because life is not ultimately meaningless. Life comes from God and those who please God can live lives of joy because God is the source of joy and meaning.

But one of the main points of Ecclesiastes is that even for God’s people life is not all sunshine and roses. Ecclesiastes is dealing with the reality of life in a fallen world and even for God’s people life can often be empty and vain. Ecclesiastes deals with what Paul would later on describe when in Romans 8 he would say that because of the fall “the creation was subjected to futility.” There is a certain futility to this earthly life even for God’s people. There is hope. There is meaning in God. Futility is not the final word or the whole picture for God’s people. But we are no longer in the Garden of Eden and we are not yet in the final kingdom of God. Our lives are part of the creation that was subjected to futility, and so we still deal with that reality. As believers in God, our lives are not devoid of meaning and eternal significance, but they are not yet free from emptiness and futility either. And Ecclesiastes wants us to be aware of the futility so that we will not have overly positive expectations of life under the sun. Ecclesiastes wants to teach us what Jesus would later teach that our greatest treasure should not be on earth, but rather in heaven.

This morning we will consider Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. The first 8 verses are a poem and verses 9-15 reflect on the subject of the poem. The poem makes the point that we live in a world in which much of life, both positive and negative, is beyond our control. This poem is descriptive; not prescriptive. It is not telling what to do; it is telling us what life is like. And the point is that there is a time for everything, but that time is not in our control. "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven." At the end of the poem he is going to ask in verse 9, "What gain has the worker from his toil?" His point is that we do all this work and yet most of what happens to us is outside of our control.

There is "a time to be born and a time to die;" We have nothing to say about the timing of either. There is "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted." The time for planting things and uprooting plants is determined by the seasons or by the fruitfulness of the plant. We must conform to the patterns of the seasons and of the nature of the plants. There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal..." We respond to situations. We find ourselves in a war where we must kill or, as would have happened in ancient Israel, the community may be called to stone someone who had committed a capital crime. Or we come across someone who has been injured and we are presented with a time to heal.

"[A] time to break down and a time to build up..." A house or a barn or a fence or a cart will outlive its usefulness and need to be torn down or broken up and something else built in its place. Today we have companies that build buildings and we have companies that tear down old buildings or sometimes they blow them up with those spectacular controlled explosions that we see on television from time to time. Time moves along, and we are faced with the need to build something new or the need to tear down something old.

"[A] time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." There are times of sorrow and times of joy. Life is not all joy and it is not all sorrow. But the time of weeping and the time of laughing are out of our control. We do not choose the time of weeping, but it comes to us. Likewise, the time of dancing. We can work towards

a goal that will make us happy, but whether it will happen or not is out of our control.

“[A] time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together....” We don’t have much to do with stones anymore, but the people who lived closer to the land had stones in their lives. Sometimes the stones were in the way and had to be cast away, for clearing a field or making a road. Sometimes the stones were needed to build a wall or a building and so, they were gathered. There was a time for each, but that time was set by circumstances.

“[A] time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing....” There is a time to embrace your sweetie and there is a time to say good-bye and go to work. There is a time to embrace a friend. There is a time when it is inappropriate to embrace a stranger or an enemy. We do not set these times. They come to us.

“[A] time to seek and a time to lose....” There is a time to look for something that has been lost, there is a time to give up looking and acknowledge that what is lost is gone forever. This can be the case for little things and big things in life. We find things and we lose things and some of the things we lose are irretrievably lost.

“[A] time to keep and a time to cast away....” Some things are still useful, and so we keep them. Some things we keep in the crawl space. Some things go to the dump. This is part of life and the passing of time. Time moves along, and things get old and fall apart and are no longer useful or the situation changes and they are no longer needed. There is a time to keep the high-chair and there is a time to get rid of it. There is a time to keep a car and there is a time to get rid of it. There is a time to keep the house. There is a time to get rid of it. These times comes to us as we live our lives.

“[A] time to tear and a time to sew....” There is a time to make new clothes. There is a time when the clothes are worn out and are torn up to be used as rags.

“[A] time to keep silence, and a time to speak....” As we move through time we are confronted with different situations. In some of those

situations speaking is appropriate. In some of those situations silence is appropriate.

“[A] time to love and a time to hate....” As we move through time we are confronted with different situations. Sometimes love is appropriate. Sometime hatred is appropriate. We might wonder about the morality of hating, but the Psalms speak of “hating the assembly of evildoers” (26:5) or “hat[ing] those who pay regard to worthless idols” (31:6). So, there are times when hating is appropriate.

“[A] time for war and a time for peace....” Human beings live their lives and move through time. Sometimes they are in a time of war. Sometimes they are in a time of peace. These things happen to us. They are part of life in a fallen world.

What are we to make of this poem? What point is Ecclesiastes making by it? We must look at it in the light of the context. Verse 9 tells us how we are to interpret the poem. “What gain has the worker from his toil?” This is a rhetorical question – a question that is not a question at all. It is a statement. The author is making a point and the point is once again that we gain nothing from our toil. The Preacher is showing this in a different way. “Vanity of vanity! All is vanity.” He is showing us another way that there is no gain from all the toil at which we toil under the sun. He is showing us another way that this is true.

The point that he is making here is that the parts of our lives where we have control are actually very, very small. Most of life happens to us. Mostly we respond to things that are outside of our control. The sphere in which we are actors is actually very small. We are part of something that is much bigger than we are, and we have very little to say about what happens in our own lives.

That is the significance of his repetition of the word “time” in the poem. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” We are not in control of those times. We have nothing to say about the time of our birth or our death. We have nothing to say about the time to weep and the time to laugh. Times of sorrow come upon us. Times of laughter come upon us. All of these times come upon us and our actions have little to do with huge swaths of our lives. We do not

create these times. We respond as things happen to us and as this time comes and that time comes. And so, the area where we make things happen is very small and insignificant.

So, the author is making the point that time is not in our hands. We are in the flow of time, but we have little control over the timing of different things, being born and dying, or war or peace. Mostly we go with the flow. Much of what we do, we do because they are dictated to us by the timing of things over which we have no control. And this, according to Ecclesiastes, is part of the vanity of life under the sun. We have little influence over our own lives. And so, what we do is largely insignificant. We do not make things happen. We respond to things that happen to us as we make our way through time which we do not control.

Perhaps you have heard the couplet, "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." It comes from a poem called *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley. I'm not much of an interpreter of poems, but it seems that he is denying the point that Ecclesiastes makes in this poem about time. In one stanza, Henley writes, "In the fell clutch of circumstance/ I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance/My head is bloody, but unbowed." He seems to be saying that he is not overwhelmed by circumstances or by chance. And so, he ends the poem on a note of defiance. "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." He seems to be saying that he is in control of his life. He is the master. He is the captain.

Ecclesiastes is saying the opposite. We are not the masters of our fate. We are not the captains of our souls. There is very little in our lives that we actually control. We live in the flow of time and much of what makes up our lives happens to us rather than being under our control.

And it is in the light of this that the preacher says in verse 10, "I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with." His point is that our busyness does not accomplish much. Our sphere of influence is very small. All our busyness does not make much of a difference in the big scheme of things. Our work is more or less what God gives us to keep us busy, but it does not change much in our lives or in the world around us.

Now all this is leading somewhere, and his point is that God is the one who is in control of all these times that he has mentioned in the poem. The first part of verse 11 says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” God is in control of all of these things that we are not in control of and he has made something beautiful by weaving together all the events of our lives. God determines the time of our birth and the time of our death. God determines the time to plant and the time to pluck up what is planted. God determines the time to mourn and the time to dance. He stands above time and controls all of it and he has a plan and a purpose so that from his perspective it is beautiful.

This is the overarching reality in which we live. We are part of something much bigger than our own little lives. We live in a world in which God is in control of everything that happens and he sees how it all fits together and how every circumstance is part of a wonderful plan that he is unfolding through time. God is the great Actor in the drama of world history. He orchestrates everything that happens. And it is in that context that we are actors in the drama. We have very small parts. We control very little of what is going on. And we do not see or understand the big picture.

Listen to what Ecclesiastes says next. “Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” The Preacher is saying that even though God has put eternity into our hearts, we cannot see the whole picture of what God is doing. We cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end even though God has put eternity into our hearts. Let me unpack that a little.

What does he mean by saying that God has put eternity into our hearts? He means that we can think in terms of an eternal perspective. He does not mean that we are eternal because only God is eternal. But because we are in the image of God we can think of history from an eternal perspective. We can mentally and in our imagination, rise up above the present moment and think in terms of the whole picture. We can think about the past all the way to the beginning. We can think about the future all the way to the end. We can imagine ourselves above time,

looking down at the whole. We can imagine the whole of history from God's perspective.

Animals cannot do that. At least we have no biblical reason to think that God has put eternity into the hearts of caterpillars or even elephants. They can't think of their lives from the perspective of eternity. They cannot imagine history from God's perspective looking all the way back to the beginning and looking all the way forward to the end. We can do that because God has put eternity into our hearts. But that does not make us God. That does not make us eternal. Having eternity in our hearts is not the same thing as being eternal. And that means that we cannot see the big picture. We cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. We cannot see how God is orchestrating all the events of time in order to make everything beautiful. We cannot see how every detail in the history of the world is all part of a beautiful whole. But because God has put eternity into our hearts, we can know that God is in control of all things and from his perspective it is all beautiful. Every piece fits to form a beautiful whole.

Verses 14-15 speak of what God does. "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already as been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away." I won't deal with every phrase of these two verses. The overall thrust is clear.

The contrast is between what we do and what God does. There is no gain from what we do. The significance of our actions is very small. Whatever we accomplish is forgotten within a generation. But whatever God does, endures forever. We do not add anything to it. We cannot take anything from it. It is what God does that prevails and what matters. We do not contribute to it. We do not understand it. And so, the bottom line is that we are to fear God. "God has done it," says verse 14, "so that people fear before him." This is where the author of these verses has been heading.

What matters is what God does. We are part of this grand plan that God is unfolding and within that plan we play a very small part. Most of our lives happens to us. We do not control time, it mostly controls us. Time

is in God's hands. What life is about is what God is doing. God has set things up this way so that we will fear him. Fearing God is the bottom line.

Life is about God and not about us. God is the main actor in the drama and we are tiny actors in the drama. And our role mostly is to stand in awe of what God is doing. He is making something beautiful out of human history and for the most part we just watch it unfold.

Now again, this is not the whole picture. This is not the whole truth of our significance, but it is part of the truth. In the end, Ecclesiastes is going to tell us that everything we do will be judged and that makes it all significant. The book as a whole does not say that what we do is meaningless, but the author pricking the bubble of our self-inflated egos. He is putting us in our place. He is showing us our littleness in the big scheme of things. God fills the horizon. We are little pieces in the plan. This is the perspective of Isaiah when he wrote in Isaiah 40 that "All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness." So, fear God. Stand in awe of him. Stand in awe of what he is doing even when you cannot understand it. And realize how small **you** are, if **all the nations** are like a piece of dust on a scale. God is working towards something beautiful in human history and you and I are a very small part of that. And our role is to rejoice in what God is doing and focus on his significance and not our own. As Paul writes in Romans 11, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

And in the light of all this, enjoy your lives. Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil – this is God's gift to man." It's not our job to be in charge of the times. It's not our job to understand how God is working everything together to make everything beautiful. It's not our job to have much influence in history. Our job is to know our place and to do what God has called us to do – work and enjoy life and do good. We are not God. It's for us to fear God as we observe what he is doing in history and to be confident that he is making something beautiful.

And Jesus is the one who shows us how to do this. It is very interesting to notice how this idea of God and time is so important with respect to Jesus and mission. The climax of this principle that “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,” is the birth, death and second coming of Christ. The New Testament makes much of the fact that these events all happened at exactly the right time.

Galatians 4:4 says, “[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law...” A number of times in John’s gospel, Jesus said to his disciples that his time had not yet come or that his hour had not yet come. But then just before his crucifixion, Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” In John 12:31 Jesus said, “**Now** is the judgment of this world; **now** will the ruler of this world be cast out.” And back at John 5:28-29 Jesus had said, “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

Jesus lived his life profoundly aware of the fact that it was the unfolding of the plan of his Father. As a human being, Jesus understood that the time for him to be born and the time for him to die and every other time in between had been set by his Father. He understood his mission in life as the unfolding of God’s plan for him. His actions and his decisions were motivated by the desire to submit to the plan of his Father for his life. Just before he went to the cross he prayed to his Father, “Father, save me from this hour? But, for this purpose I have come to this hour.” In Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

Jesus shows us how to live within the context of the plan of God. He was active. He made decisions and choices, but at the same time he was aware that his life was the unfolding of God’s plan for him and his great desire was, “Not my will but, your will be done.” Jesus was the one who perfectly understood that his time was in God’s hands.

But his coming and death and second coming was and is the goal of the plan of God. Jesus and his mission are the key to the whole plan. This is what God has been working toward. This is how the plan can be

beautiful. God is working everything for his own glory and that will be realized in its fullness in the salvation of sinners and the victory over sin. Jesus was and is at the heart of that.

Ecclesiastes 3 says “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” The point is that God is in control of time – everything happens at the right time, because it is the unfolding of the plan of God. The key to the whole is Jesus Christ. Because of that, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” And we know that God is still in charge of everything that happens and at just the right time, Jesus will come again and will perfect all who are trusting in him and he will make all things new.