

**A sermon preached by Mary Whitcomb at Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
Sunday, August 13, 2023.**

**WHAT TIME IS IT?**

Ecclesiastes 1:1-9, 3:1-11; Psalms 136:1-9; II Peter 1:1-7

This Book of Ecclesiastes is a strange one, in a way. The author is Qohelet, (qoi-hi-leh-teh) probably a pen name, likely a teacher or preacher. Scholars believe it was written about 450 BCE, during a period of tremendous economic growth, brought on largely by the introduction of standardized coinage by the Persian government. Money was a commodity, desired for its own sake. For that reason, it became possible for the poorest to become wealthy, but it brought both opportunity and risk.

The context addressed goes beyond the economic one. The sense that the individual is just a small part of a very large scene is evident in some of the political references to injustice and oppression. Sound familiar?

Early verses reflect the first of many variations on a theme – that of the futility of all things human. Knowledge, wealth, love, life itself, are all illusory, imaginary. This is just how the world is!

(Verse 9,) “What was will be again, what has been done, will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun!” It is a cycle! One we keep repeating because we can’t see the future and don’t remember or at least learn from the past.

Despite all our efforts and work, everything stays the same. No matter what we do nothing changes - what’s the point? Sounds a little depressing and grim, doesn’t it? It appears that way on the surface, but scattered in those repetitive verses of that theme are choruses that acknowledge God as the source of all gifts, purpose and meaning. That’s what we don’t want to lose sight of.

Then comes a passage very familiar to us. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” The verses that follow are coupled in a rhythmic pattern of opposites and represent a variety of times, or seasons encountered by all human beings, either individually, in groups, in societies, or as nations. They are seasons of the cycle and imply balance.

So what time is it? Where in this cycle of an ever-changing society and world are we? What does the time in which we find ourselves ask of us? Is it of any comfort to us that we are facing the same challenges as other generations through the centuries have?

One thing is certain, and that is that the world of Qohelet was pretty small compared to what we know. Never has the world been so open. I don’t mean open in the sense of accepting, but open in the sense of exposed. We know, or at least see, so much about the world, or the part of it that is dramatically exploding every day on the evening news, morning network news shows, 24-hour cable news programs, and social media.

When Qohelet says there is nothing new under the sun, I believe he meant that each civilization goes through the same growing pains, and experiences similar dynamics of

growth, peaks of development and decline. Yet, there has never been a time, as best as we can extract from history's telling of itself, that has felt so complicated or so unsettling. Much of what we have trusted to be true for most of our lives is being challenged. It's easy to feel overwhelmed.

September 11<sup>th</sup> will never again be just another fall day.

Political decisions are prompted more by what will deliver power to them than benefit to the people.

Families work hard, save responsibly for their children's education and their retirement only to watch their resources disappear in a financial tornado fed by corporate corruption and greed.

Our schools are not the happy playgrounds most of us remember. Doors are locked in many of them, and security takes the precedent over exploration and freedom to learn.

We can feel a little out of balance.

What time is it? How do we maintain the balance of the cycles?

**Well, maybe one of the best things to remember is that God is in charge of our lives.** Fortunately, we can go beyond the wisdom of Ecclesiastes to guide us. We as Christians swear by something greater than ourselves to cope with the disappointments, challenges and uncertainties of life. So much of the Scripture tells us that we can count on God.

There are powerful resources available to us through God's grace and due to this wonderful spiritual connection we have with Him and with others because of His spirit. These resources are made real to us as gifts of the spirit, gifts of grace.

Galatians 5:22 embellishes this by saying that "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control;" It all makes sense while we're sitting here on Sunday morning. How often do we really think of these resources or where can we see them in our daily lives? Let's call it looking for small wonders. They may be short human stories that are vital examples of spiritual expression or just magical moments too often missed that can make a difference.

Let's take a look.

Romans 5:4,5 reads, "...let us exult too, in our hardships, understanding that hardship develops perseverance, and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope, and a hope which will not let us down," One of these gifts of grace is hope!

Let me share a small wonder. It is actually the title of a book by Barbara Kingsolver in which the story appears. It is a true story.

The setting is the oak-forested hills of Lorena Province in Iran. The story begins with a wife and husband, nomads of the Lori tribe near Kayhan, coming home from a

morning's work in their wheat field. The young girl who cares for the babies meets them on the path. She is in tears as she tells them their son is missing. The search begins to all the familiar places he might go. He has barely learned to walk, so they can't believe he can go far. Three days into the search, some start to give up. "But not the father and mother, because there is nowhere to go but this, we all have done this, we bang and bang on the door of hope, and don't anyone dare suggest there's nobody home."

They start looking in the caves in the mountains, fearing what they will find. "—they hear a voice. Definitely it's a cry, a child. .... They move into the half-light inside the cave, stand still and wait while the smell gets danker.... Then they see the animal, the round shape of a thick-furred, quiescent she-bear lying against the wall. And then they see the child. The bear is curled around him, protecting him from these fierce-smelling intruders in her cave. .... He was alive, unscarred and perfectly well after 3 days – and well fed smelling of milk. The bear was nursing the child."

They lifted him out of the arms of the bear and wrapped him for the trip home.

The small wonder is that "In a world whose wells of kindness seem everywhere to be running dry, a bear nursed a lost child."

I John 5:4 reminds us of the power of faith to defeat all manner of evil, "this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith." Faith is active, not passive. It doesn't get you around things; it gets you through them. Faith is believing in the light that doesn't come until tomorrow.

Here is a story. Not too far from the house I once owned in Albuquerque was a sign for ristras, strings of red chilies to hang on the porch. I needed some, so I turned down the dirt alley to where they hung behind a house. On the other side of a tall fence was a man helping a couple of men with car repair. He had no upper teeth, unshaven, but had a big smile. I said, "are you the one that makes the ristras." He said, "Yes." So he came quickly around to help me put them in the car. "I don't put no spray on them, so you can eat them too." He then wasted no time telling me his story. Two years ago he became very ill, had to quit his job, and discovered he had cancer as well as a rare condition affecting his heart. "I was told I had 6 weeks to live. Well, now I was scared. I been a Christian since '73, but wasn't no good at going to church, but I started going back. I got lots of chemotherapy and all the tests now show there ain't no more cancer. They been checking for over a year. Now, I know them drugs were good, but it is God that did it." Not a question in his mind. It is amazing what you encounter when you just think you're going to buy ristras.

A reference in Acts 2:46 speaks of believers meeting together and sharing with "great joy and generosity – all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all people." Joy is a rare commodity. It is what helps us see beauty in simple things.

Another small wonder. I flew some time ago through Chicago O'Hare with a 4-hour layover. I used some of the time to walk the length of one of the terminals. The atrium that connects H and K is a lovely corridor of colorful International flags with plenty of natural light. Close to gate K2 is a cloud of bubbles, hundreds of small bubbles floating in the air. Two little girls are mystified and amused to the point that they are oblivious to the fact that their plane is late. Life at that point is pure joy. They try to catch the bubbles

and see how long they will stay on their hands or clothes before disappearing. How I wish I had a camera! But that is not all. An older lady in a wheel chair who looks a little weary from difficult travel starts to reach for the same bubbles with the same magical smile. Oh – then there is the flight attendant and the pilot and several other passengers waiting for that same late plane – all lost for a moment in this small wonder, this moment of joy.

How do we make these stories more than just words? Practice! Practice! Practice! I urge you to try something. Engage in the practice or discipline daily of looking for one small wonder – not as a point of escape, but as affirmation of the joy, or hope, or love, or kindness, or faith that will help usher in the next season of the cycle. That is what perseveres.

Practice it with your children, with others' children, with each other and for yourself.

There are precious few, if any, small wonders or little miracles being reported on the evening news. Rather, there are reports of war and rumors of war, images of fear, greed, hatred, and pain. So, turn off the news, turn to a member of your family and say, "You know what I saw today?" "I heard this story today, or this joke." You can even do it for yourself. Fall asleep with one image of that which brings joy, represents hope, expresses love, supports tolerance, promotes generosity, or just results in a smile. It will bring balance to your life. It will help you focus on the resources of your faith.

So what time is it? Perhaps the only way we need to respond is remember again what Peter said "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

There is a time for everything, but God is always there.