

New Year's Eve B 31 December 2020
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace, Dear Saints, Peace, Mercy, Love, and Eternity to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
Let's pray:

The writer of Ecclesiastes [*Qoheleth*, the "Teacher," who assumes the persona of King Solomon] doesn't look at the world through rose-tinted glasses. It doesn't take a genius to observe that life isn't always fair; that the going can get pretty rough; that the things we tend to count on in this world will sooner or later fade away. If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that anything is possible and that we should take nothing for granted. Cherish every breath you take. Just flip through Ecclesiastes and you'll find sayings like: 'Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all' (9:11). Wisdom says, "That's just the way it is."

Chapter 3, with all its talk of times and seasons, is descriptive, not prescriptive. Qoheleth doesn't say this is what you should do, here are all the items to be checked off on your 'to do' list: kill and heal, seek and lose, make war and make peace—no. Simply: this is the way life is. There are times of war and times of peace, just as there are times of mourning and times of dancing, times of love and times of hate, times of breaking down and times of building up. Qoheleth tells it like it is.

This isn't meant to be a sweet poem about only beautiful things. This isn't Louis Armstrong's, *What a wonderful world* enjoyed with a fine cigar and cognac. This is *What a wonderful world* as it's used in *Good morning, Vietnam*, played as a soundtrack for some of the most disturbing war footage in that movie. Because the world around us is both, isn't it? It's wonderful and awful, it's filled with moments of bitter grief and moments of profound joy. People

are born and they die. We weep and we laugh. We work and we play. In the midst of life's uncertainties, there are certain things we can expect to encounter sooner or later. Some are fantastic. Some are painful. Some are pretty ordinary. That's just the way it is.

The fact that Qoheleth describes what he sees without pulling any punches is a tremendous gift to us. We need this kind of honesty in the Scriptures. We need it because we should always be able to speak the truth without being guarded or feeling ashamed. We need to know that we won't be judged, as people of faith, for calling it like we see it, for calling things the way they are. We don't have to stick to some kind of script of palatable topics for Christian conversation.

But where's the cry for social justice in Ecclesiastes? Where's Qoheleth's table-turning indignation over the fact that people do tear, and break down, and hate, and kill? Where's the call for us to not just reflect on what we see around us, but stand up and do something about it?

Sure, there were times in ancient Israel's history when they needed words of comfort. But there were also times when they needed strong words of challenge to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. The more we learn about the history of the people among whom the Scriptures first circulated, the more it becomes clear that its various parts were written to address them in strikingly different situations. The right word from God for the right moment. Whether to afflict the comfortable. Or to comfort the afflicted.

And because we are heirs of that same history and we understand there are seasons, we know that there will be dark days and there will be days filled with life and light. In any given sanctuary on any given Sunday, you'll find people who are concerned about the end of life, people who are struggling, as well as people who are deeply content, or celebrating new life.

These are the seasons we pass through as a congregation. For example, I know that over many years, you've been grieved to watch the health of beloved long-time members deteriorate to the point where they can't be with us anymore in worship; you've had to say farewell to a number of these dear

friends, too, as we did to Eric Schwarz yesterday. But, you've also rejoiced together at the gift of new life as you've welcomed babies into the church family through baptism, celebrated the addition of wonderful new members to our church family, and enjoyed watching both little and large sheep and shepherds, wise men and angels in our Nativity plays. Endings and new beginnings. Times for grieving, and times for celebrating.

That's what it means to be a church family – to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. To build one another up. Not just to play for the same team, but to be each other's support crew. Like a marriage - for better or for worse, whether we find ourselves in a season of dancing and embracing or a season of loss and disappointment.

So, no matter which season you find yourself in at the moment, you are part of a church family that cares about you, with an ancient, timeless Papa who cherishes you, loves you, and dotes over you. No matter what season you are experiencing currently, there is a word from Abba for you in this mysterious, multi-faceted, disarmingly colourful book we call the Bible, his everlasting love letter and eternal promise. And no matter how exhilarating, confusing, or infuriating life may be from one day to the next, remember that the sun will rise and it will set, the wind will blow, streams will keep running to the sea, and—more importantly—God will stand firm through it all, and we will stand in awe before him.

That's just the way it is. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all seasons of understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.