

Message for December 27, 2020

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

Luke 2:22-38

He didn't mean to but one of my retired colleagues threw me a bit of a curve ball last year. It was just before a presbytery meeting and some of us were standing around chatting. He came and joined us and then, speaking directly to me asked: "And how is the granddaddy of the presbytery this evening?" Now I have known him for over thirty years and knew that he was gently teasing me but even so ... I found it slightly jarring. I am the granddaddy of the presbytery? Since when?!

During the meeting that followed I looked around at those present and realized why he had called me that. Of the twenty-some full-time ministers in our presbytery I am the oldest, have been in this presbytery the longest and have been a full-time minister the longest too. Perhaps I shouldn't be shocked then to be called the granddaddy of the presbytery! In the past I had looked at the older more experienced ministers of our presbytery and, with a sense of respect, nicknamed them "the old boys" but to discover that I am now perceived to be an old boy myself? It made me wonder; where has the time gone? Perhaps no one though was more aware of the passage of time than the author of this morning's first scripture passage.

Today's first passage is one of the better known ones of the Bible and has had an impact on popular culture inspiring several well-known songs.

"There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.”

Now most people think of this passage as being a comforting one, finding both meaning and reassurance in the idea that there is a time for everything. While we generally like to interpret this passage in this way though, that was not the attitude of “The Preacher” as the author of this passage is often referred to as. He didn’t find comfort in the idea that there is a time for everything; not at all. Rather the key to understanding his outlook on life is summed up by the next line which is, more often than not, ignored altogether: “What do workers gain from their toil?”

Truly “The Preacher” felt very ambivalent about the passage of time. The good news is that there is a time for everything but the not so good news is: “so what?” One person has summed up this author’s outlook on life as: “Get up, eat breakfast, go to work, come home, eat dinner, watch TV and go to bed. Get up, eat breakfast, go to work, come home, eat dinner, watch TV and go to bed.” And on and on it goes. What is the point, value or purpose of it all anyway? These are words of pain, disappointment and perhaps even despair, and sadly these words may also capture how many people feel at this time.

It goes without saying but this year has been a difficult and painful one for so many. At the beginning life was generally pretty good and in Boston there was a rising sense of anticipation as many looked forward to celebrating the congregation’s 200th anniversary. A full slate of activities was planned and then in mid-March, the wheels so to speak fell off the wagon. The pandemic struck and almost overnight life was turned upside down. Gradually during the summer things seemed to get better but then

the second wave struck and once again we have now been placed in lockdown.

Of course all of this has had an impact on our Christmas celebrations too since so many events and activities had to be curtailed or cancelled altogether. To be sure there is the wonderful news about the approval and rollout of the vaccines but the sobering reality is that it will take months for enough of us to be vaccinated so that the restrictions can be lifted. In these circumstances it may be easy enough to adopt the same attitude as “The Preacher” but if or when we feel this way we should remember the principle character in today’s second scripture passage.

This passage recounts an event that took place a month or so after Jesus’ birth. Like many other religious parents, Joseph and Mary went to the Temple in Jerusalem to make a special offering for the safe birth of their son. There was an old man who virtually lived at the temple named Simeon. He was a very religious man who had had a mystical experience years before in which he had been told that he would not die until he had seen the long-awaited messiah. Well, he waited and waited; the days became weeks, the weeks became months, and the months became years. The years then became decades and still he waited and hoped. Then the day finally arrived. Simeon saw a young couple enter the Temple grounds carrying a baby. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about them at all but Simeon knew without being told that they were the ones he had been waiting for. Simeon asked and was given permission to hold the child. He then praised God and went on to talk about both Jesus’ and Mary’s futures.

Now imagine for a moment what it had been like for Simeon, spending decades waiting to catch a glimpse of the messiah. There must have been times when he had felt discouraged and asked “how long?” There must have been times when he felt like giving up yet he didn’t. He held on to his hope and his faith, neither of which were misplaced. And so, he may well be a good example for us at the present time.

2020 has been a very difficult and challenging year and yet, despite it all we can and should still have faith and hope. We can and should simply because of the great promise and truth of what we have been celebrating this month: Emmanuel, God is with us. And it is this, the loving, comforting, guiding, strengthening presence of God that frees us to journey into the future without fear or dread. I have long liked the way a great Presbyterian theologian of days gone by put it.

John MacKay said that life is like rowing a rowboat. As we row trying to propel ourselves forwards, we are of course facing backwards and so we cannot see where we are going. We can see where we have been and, glancing over our shoulders, we may catch a glimpse of where we are going but we don't really know. And so it is, said MacKay, with us on life's journey. We can look back and see where we've been and what we've done. We may even catch glimpses of the future but that is about it. Even so, we need not fear. We need not fear and we can always have hope because, as MacKay said, we do not travel alone. We have a pilot or guide on board sitting opposite us. That pilot or guide is of course God. Even if we can't see the future we are rowing into God can, and since he is with us we have nothing to fear and that includes times such as these. With this in mind I would like to close my last message for this year with this passage taken from the poem "The Gate of the Year".

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.