

About Time

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, January 1, 2017

Scripture: [Ecclesiastes 3:1–13](#)

Sermon

For everything there is a season... including a time to read this rather strange book Ecclesiastes, or, if you prefer it's original title: Qoheleth. Essentially, it's a pseudonym for gatherer of the assembly, or, "preacher." It joins with the Book of Job as part of what we sometimes call the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, while also being a critique of the other books besides those two. Job very specifically ponders profound questions of why bad things happen to good people and where God can be in that world. Ecclesiastes more generally addresses the experience of being alive. Besides this passage, the writer's famous take aways are "...all is vanity and chasing after wind" and "there is nothing new under the sun." This is not a great book to bring as a holiday present, unless you're giving it to a pretty downtrodden PhD in philosophy.

But there is wisdom here... Pete Seeger I guess knew it, even if we needed John, Paul, George, and Ringo to make us find it again.

If you have been keeping up with the news, or then the internet reacting to news, it seems that we have finally found a rallying cry that can unite us as a culture: **2016 was awful**. This kind of humorous way of personifying the year has been a widespread way of memorializing folks, but there has been a sense, maybe because the heroes of the younger generation are all getting to a certain age, that 2016 has been going around claiming the lives of wonderful people... the musician David Bowie, the actor Alan Rickman, or—for the families: Snape, this recent bout of Carrie Fischer immediately followed by her mother Debbie Reynolds.

There have been plenty of other things about 2016 that people seem to be in a hurry to be rid of as well. Whatever a given person's feelings about the result of the election, there seems to be pretty universal belief that the process of it was generally a net negative for humanity. The election, as well as a number of other social movements that have come to a head in the year have led to if not more division, but an awareness of our divisions, our anxieties over those divisions, and a sense of inability to change those things which divide us one from the other seems to have greatly increased.

So , yeah... I tried really hard for a verb for what I would like to say to 2016 myself... I can't say any of them in church. I mean, you can, but... my grandmother is watching or something, so I can't.

I don't think we've ever given a year a character in quite this way... though, Qoheleth would remind me there's nothing new under the sun, so I look forward to someone telling me what an evil jerk 1954 was in coffee hour.

The thing about us and time... is we're so sure that our measure of it is the important one... and that we are responsible for its maintenance. And Ecclesiastes would like to have a word with us about that.

We spend time running frantically towards good times and just as frantically away from bad times. In the process, we often run from the risk of connection into the numbness of disconnection. We often think we will be drastically different people on day one of the new year than we were the 365 days previous. New Year's Resolutions all in place, everyone?

We're so certain that measure of our time will be the minute or two before it ends. Or should it be a measure of how long we stay alive? Or maybe how the majority of my life feels? If I spend 20 years exuberantly happy and only 5 miserable... is that a better life than if the reverse had been true?

Before you answer those questions, it's a good time to remember that in Jesus, we follow one who was born poor in a stable and died at around 33 on the torture device of an empire. Yet we sing Joy to the World. And we mean it, because that life was meaning-ful.

Probably the best thing I have read about time recently is a short story by Ted Chiang called "Story of Your Life." It's now been turned into a movie that's out some places, *Arrival*. I won't spoil the movie, because, I can't: I haven't seen it... but I've been assured they've had to—you know—make it into a movie. The story is told by a linguist who is brought in when alien ships appear in orbit around earth. Louise Banks is called in to help learn how to speak to the new visitors. There's a lot of things between here and there, but one of the keys to understanding the alien language is discovering that the aliens don't understand time the way we do: they don't perceive it as happening one thing after another. They perceive it all happening at once. The humans in discussion with them are suddenly faced with profound questions... if they could foresee all of the challenges and pains to come in their lives, would they live them, or would they flee from them?

Ecclesiastes says God has placed eternity in our hearts, a sense of something great, but that no one understands what God has done from the beginning to the end. The Hebrew says *olam*: that which is hidden, or eternity, all the past and future that ever was or will be... and yet we can't *know* it. So, will we *live it* anyway? Live it with all its challenges, knowing we can still make progress?

We're pretty sure this year was lousy, and we hope the next one is better. This lousy year, though, by the way?

- Measles was eradicated in the Americas this year. Most excellent.
- Albert Einstein was proved correct about the existence of gravitational waves. Which is mind-bogglingly cool.
- The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, the two largest groups of Christianity met together for the first time in 1000 years. No one was declared a heretic. Progress.
- I mean, as a point of personal privilege, I got married. I'm not gonna tell you how to feel about that, but I like it very much.
- And, depending how you feel about that sort of thing: the Chicago Cubs won the World Series.

In the end, which is another beginning, our story, the baby in the manger all grown up but reborn again, says to the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." - [Revelation 21:6](#)

Eternity in our hearts, we begin again, and drink deep. Amen.