

“Now It’s Time”

Ecclesiastes 3.1-14

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I find it very interesting that the people who choose the texts for the Revised Common Lectionary include this verse for January 1: “It is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” I don’t know about you, but over the last ten days, I’ve consumed far more calories and wine than I typically do, and it’s nice to have overindulgence affirmed by scripture.

I’m also not typically a person who makes New Year’s resolutions, in part because I have usually found that they don’t stick (or more truthfully, I don’t stick to them). And this year I’m also not making resolutions linked to the New Year, but I do have some changes that I’m making in my life after a too-close encounter with my own mortality...but that is a sermon for another day.

Our family had dinner with friends last week, and we were reflecting together on 2016. My friend had been out of work for much of the year and his wife required orthopedic surgery, but it was also a year when one daughter began to really thrive in high school and the other daughter won a coveted Boettcher scholarship.

And for our family, it has been a mixed year as well, with wonderful travels, sons who are growing and learning, but also a year marked by the specter of cancer. And I am profoundly grateful to be here today, and to have been here with you on Christmas Eve. You all lift my spirits; and I felt very well prayed for and cared for by you in the three weeks following my surgery. And I feel profoundly grateful also for the medical community here in Fort Collins, and also for having really great medical insurance coverage. (I wish that all of us had both of those things available to us.)

Still, the other night I found myself saying “Thank God 2016 is over,” but a voice inside of me says instead, “Give thanks.” I know that I have more to be thankful for than most people who inhabit God’s Earth. And when reading Ecclesiastes, I also remember that days of sorrow and paired with days of joy. Those pairings are normative within the human condition, but we, most of us, live sheltered lives to a greater or lesser extent. Our culture doesn’t talk much about dealing with difficulty as much as it does insulating ourselves from it with material pleasure and technology.

I think the way most of us raising kids today think, we have bred them to not expect adversity, sorrow, death, or war. And we want to shield them from such things. Brené Brown, the wise observer of human behavior (and progressive Episcopalian) made

this observation: “Hope is not an emotion. Hope is a cognitive, behavioral process that we learn when we experience adversity, when we have relationships that are trustworthy, when people have faith in our ability to get out of a jam.... The most beautiful things I look back on in my life are coming out from underneath things I didn’t know I could get out from underneath. The moments I look back in my life and think, ‘God, those are the moments that made me,’ were moments of struggle.”ⁱ

Whatever we struggle with in 2017 will be a mixture of weeping and laughter, of mourning and dancing, of love and hate, of healing and breaking down, of seeking and losing. That is the pattern of life as it is. One of the characteristics of the book of Ecclesiastes is that the writer tells it like it is, without too much sugar-coating. His vision just doesn’t pair up very well with what we 21st century Americans are told in the media to expect...which is that we are entitled to be insulated, entertained, have access to cheap manufactured goods, really fast technology, freedom from body odor, and more calories than we need to survive.

2017 will be a different year for us as well with the change of administration on January 20. Regardless of where you find yourself on the political spectrum, it is going to be different. And I don’t think any of us knows just what that will look like. (Think

about it: who would have suspected that a *Democratic* president would be getting tough on Russia, while a *Republican* president-elect wants to sweep a Russian cyberattack under the carpet?) These are not normal times.

And I think that it is normal for us as a nation to be feeling some anxiety about how governance is going to play out both nationally and internationally. We have the threat of a renewed nuclear arms race, a black hole developing around not just the Affordable Care Act, but around Medicare and Medicaid, not to mention the perennial issues of global warming, peace in the Middle East, and terror that knows no borders.

But we also have some things going for us: a strong economy (albeit one that has not affected many blue-collar workers to the same extent it has information workers); an environment that is rich beyond measure...if we can just learn to take good care of it; a Constitution that preserves the rights of free speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to assemble.

We should not take any of those for granted. And we may be called to put our faith into action more than we have in recent years. We may need to re-read the Beatitudes from Luke's account — blessing the poor, the hungry, those who weep now, the hated,

the excluded — and we may need to learn to love our enemies more fully and deeply, which is a tall order.

These are heady days for the mainline church, especially those of us who find ourselves in the progressive wing of the church. A recent article in *The Atlantic* claims that the election result “is bringing progressive Protestants back to church.”ⁱⁱ And I have sensed that here at Plymouth...but it goes a lot deeper than church attendance.

We are going to have to listen even more closely to the prophetic words of Jesus than we ever have. We are going to need to be willing to make sacrifices greater than we ever have. We are going to need to come together more than we ever have. We are going need to build bridges better than we ever have. Because God needs us to stand in the gap between where humanity is and where Christ calls us to be as we work for the kingdom he proclaimed.

What I am talking about is not being a good Democrat or a good Republican. I am talking about becoming a better follower of Jesus. Maybe it is time for us not to make a resolution...but to make a difference.

It is not that this is a exactly a new course for us at Plymouth, nor is it a new course for the church, which is always truer to the gospel when we get closer to the Jesus of history and function, as

Emerson put it, more as the movement and less as the establishment. Think about the history of our Congregational and UCC tradition and the history of this church...we have seldom settled for the status quo. Throughout our history, we have been a church that unites people in personal faith and social responsibility.

For everything, there *is* a season. And the season for lackadaisical faith is gone. We are moving into a time when our mettle will be tested as Christians. Will we be up to the challenge? I am confident that we will. And the good news is that we are not alone...other people of faith will stand with us, and God stands behind us. And whatever we do, we will do it with a sense of faith, a sense of love, and a sense of joy. That is what it means to be God's children.

I leave you on this New Year's Day, the last Sunday of Christmastide, with the words of Howard Thurman, a 20th century Christian mystic:

**When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,**

**To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.
Amen.**

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ⁱ Brené Brown. “Courage is Born from Struggle” on public radio’s *On Being*

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/courage-is-born-from-struggle-bren-brown/8601>

ⁱⁱ *The Atlantic*, online version Dec. 11, 2016.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/trump-mainline-protestant-churches/510185/>