



“Sowing Faith”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. I'm sure you will know this passage, but listen again for how God is speaking to you in a new way through something that is familiar. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

For the past two weeks we have taken up the topic of faith at work amidst the storms of life, faith at work when our world pushes against it, and today this passage gives us a great opportunity to talk about faith literally at work and in its proper season. An ideal for some preachers is to preach on a text in a way that will make the Scripture memorable, will make it come to life. Thanks to the Byrds and their 1960s recording, this shouldn't be a problem. If you leave here this afternoon with nothing else other than the tune "To everything, turn, turn, turn..." running through your minds I believe the world will be a little better place today. And you will carry a piece of the gospel with you. For our special music today, I did consider running this greatest hit through the sound system, but as I've only been here for three weeks and would love to stay longer, perhaps we'll save that for next year. It is amazing to see how our notions of work have developed throughout Christian history. In the early church in what is called the Patristic tradition, work was a means by which individuals could avoid sin and attain virtue because work involved suffering and sweat and therefore might serve as penance for sins. It required activity which replaced idleness that was at that time considered the devil's workshop. In the Medieval period harsh conditions and grueling, demanding labor prompted individuals to connect their work with their Christianity through a theology of the cross- in that they felt they were sharing in a portion of Jesus' suffering. Ancient supervisors must have been thrilled because according to theologian Edward Vacek these Christians practiced Christian resignation- working not for a better life for themselves on earth, but rather anticipating their reward in heaven. Our early brothers and sisters lived in expectation that the end of the world was near, and thus concentrated their efforts on casting distinctions on what is merely trappings of the physical world, and what are energies and thoughts worthy of the kingdom of God. Thomas Aquinas threw his two cents into the Medieval conversation in his Summa Theologica, stating that work was not

only inferior, but “hinders the contemplative, in so far as it is impossible for one to be busy with external action and at the same time give oneself to Divine contemplation.” One wonders how any of his thoughts ever got written down.

Fortunate for us, the winds of change began to blow on Christian perspectives of work. Christians soon began to embrace their place in the world and saw that renunciation of the world and of our labor was like throwing away a gift from God. They began to discern that, though we are children of God, we are also people of this earth, called to live out our lives in assurance that what we do here impacts God’s kingdom, as that Kingdom is surely among us even now. Our teacher in Ecclesiastes has their own notions about Christian vocation, our writer says “I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time...I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. Moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” Does this sound a bit idyllic? If you think so, you are not alone- a columnist in the NY Times recently wrote in his article, “There’s a reason we call it work”, that “work is more bearable when we don’t, in addition to money, expect it always to deliver happiness.” And, I don’t know about you, but I don’t always understand why there has to be a time for every season under heaven anyway. Why must there be a time for war? A time to die? A time to hate? A time to weep? I don’t like those things. For those of us who like to keep things in their proper place, what is the author of Ecclesiastes talking about when he says that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil...you can’t drink on the job?! In our compartmentalized lifestyles, isn’t there a time for work, then a time for worship? A time for business, then a time for faith? When I walk out of the door in the morning, I leave my husband behind, the laundry behind, and think on work because that is what work demands. And isn’t it easy to leave our faith behind too? Believe it or not, even in the ministry this is not unheard of- when we go about the business of the church sometimes even I get lost in the numbers. When you are confronting an angry boss or an irritable colleague, or mounting deadlines, missed deadlines, or an ethical dilemma at work or jokes that are made at the expense of others, or when you experience anxiety in your heart over finding a vocation, keeping a vocation, or changing a vocation when so much is at stake, what does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to have faith at work-is that even possible?

There is a tricky Hebrew word that shows up in all sorts of passages throughout the Old Testament. The word is “Avodah.” What makes this word so special is that it is used often and interchangeably for three things: Work, worship, and service, and informs any discussion of work. A colleague of mine in Seminary, David Miller, was so impressed with this word that he founded an entire institute for the integration of faith at work in its name, dedicating himself to discerning the practical ways faith intersects, often with great difficulty, in our lives in the workplace. The idea that is beckoned by this word and that our author today suggests is that these things are, in fact, intrinsically interconnected. Our work is our worship because God has commissioned our work, our vocation, to the service of his kingdom. Our worship is our service to God because it brings glory to his name. The question becomes not ‘how can I bring my faith to work’, the question becomes how can you not? Your Christian self is who you are- it is your

contribution to the kingdom of God and that is a vocation worth delighting in! The challenge becomes, then, discerning what season you and those around you are in, and figuring out how to respond accordingly to that season in faith. For God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet God's perspective on the totality of our life and work is for him alone to know, much to our frustration most of the time. It keeps us in line. The impact of our response to assaults on our Christian notions of justice and ethics, the way our words echo through the lives of those around us who, I promise, are listening, is not for our eyes to see or our minds to comprehend, and that leaves us with faith. Faith at work, faith put to work, faith as work, faith in and through work, work as an act of faith and worship.

Today is the first day of Autumn, my favorite time of year. It seemed appropriate to take up this topic in worship today because new seasons tend to prompt us to take a new perspective on things. Colors change and make the world around us look different, drying leaves on the trees sound their applause for cooler breezes, and there is the anticipation that long hazy summer months will soon return crops of new fruit. And while there is the anticipation of winter months that may bring harsh realities, God has somehow made everything suitable for its time, and when our eyes are opened to this time we will stand in awe before him. The word Avodah is used frequently in reference to the work of tilling the land. So as you tend to your corner of the kingdom, in whatever vocation you will return to this day, know that as you toil you are sowing faith as you go, for your faith is at work all around you and this gives glory to God. Challenge yourself to hear the familiar words of our author anew, and seek enjoyment of the gifts of God's calling. Do not worry about mistakes past for that which is already has been, but speak with boldness when you are inclined to speak for love for God is the Lord of the conscience and that which is to be already is, and may be established through you in God's kingdom. When you find yourself facing the time of dormancy that is necessary before seeds planted within yourself can grow, be of good courage, for every season has its place and nothing is weeded out of God's time. And as you observe the seasons within your own life be mindful of those around you who may be experiencing months of drought or harvest, because we are all in this together, and they might need to borrow your tools.