

“The Right Time”

a sermon by

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**Text: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven”
(Ecclesiastes 3: 1).**

Will Willimon, who for a number of years served as the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, once related an experience he had some years ago in West Germany. It was the fall of 1989 and he was giving some lectures at one of the German universities. One evening he encountered a junior-year Duke student who was spending the year in Germany. They began talking about the situation in East Germany. This student said to him, “I was talking with this girl I met in a bar in Leipzig who told me that she expects East Germany to fall within the next few weeks.”

Willimon was astonished. He told the young student that he had been meeting with a group of distinguished professors from West Germany and they assured him that nothing was going to change within Germany within the next decade.

“Well,” said the young man, “This girl knows some other students who said the same thing.”

By this time Willimon was really getting irritated. “Surely,” he said, “by the time you get to be a senior at the University you will be able to get more accurate information than from random people in bars.”

Two weeks later, when Willimon had returned to the United States, he turned on the news to discover that the Berlin Wall had fallen.

I.

“For everything there is a season,” writes Ecclesiastes, “a time for every purpose under heaven, a time to be born, and a time to die,” yes, and even a time when walls are torn down.

The Book of Ecclesiastes occupies a strange place in the Biblical canon. It is a dark and brooding book in many ways. H. Wheeler Robinson once observed that the book had about it “the stench of death,” and many scholars have wondered if it really belonged in the Bible or not. “Vanity of vanity,” writes the author, “all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). The word “vanity” is a translation of the Hebrew word “hebel,” which means “vapor,” “air,” or “smoke.” The authorship of the book has traditionally been ascribed to King Solomon, though it appears that the book comes from a much later time.

Like so many of the wisdom teachers, Ecclesiastes affirms God’s ways and purposes in creation. “God has made everything beautiful,” writes Ecclesiastes, “in its season.” The problem, according to Ecclesiastes, is not that God does not ordain the times. The problem is that humans cannot ascertain what God has done. So, what can we learn from this discordant voice we know as Ecclesiastes?

II.

For one thing, Ecclesiastes affirms that there is such a thing as “the right time.” There is a time to be born and a time to die.

One of the most striking differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the fundamental difference in the reckoning of time. For Ecclesiastes, time is not linear, it is cyclical. “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). That explains the negative view of Ecclesiastes. Life is repetitious, predictable, and tedious.

In the New Testament, time is viewed in a linear fashion. The New Testament sees an unfolding of events that begins in the creation of the world, finds its meaning in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and looks for the culmination of life in the Second Coming of Jesus.

But it isn’t just the concept of time that marks this difference between the Old and New Testament. The Greek language has two different words for time. One is the word “chronos,” from which we derive our word “chronology.” “Chronos” is time measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days and years. But the Greek language has another word, “Kairos,” which is also translated as time. A “Kairos” moment is a moment of opportunity. It is time measured, not just in seconds and minutes, but it is a measure in terms of an opportunity seized or lost.

Sometimes as a teacher, I realize there is such a thing as a “teachable moment,” the sacred, unknown moment when suddenly the student’s eyes light up, the heart quickens, and you know that it is the right time. In his book on preaching, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Buechner tells of one of these teaching moments. He was teaching Shakespeare’s play, *King Lear*, to a group of high school students. The class was after lunch, the day was hot, and the students appeared to be interested in almost anything else except Shakespeare. Buechner noted that the class had, for some reason, gone better that day. It was the third act that was up for grabs—Lear was on the hearth with Kent and the Fool, and the storm was coming up. “What evidence do you find,” Buechner asked the students, “for believing that Lear has changed for the better?” William Urquhart, a large, heavyweight boy who had his head on his desk, spoke with a muffled voice. “He’s gotten kinder.” “What makes you think so?”

asked Buechner. This time it was another boy, Greg Dixon, who picked up the ball. “Well,” he said, “when it starts to rain, he thinks about keeping the Fool dry too.” See, here it is. “‘Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/That’s sorry yet for thee.’ He’s getting kinder to people, just like Urquhart said.”

“Also, he says a prayer for people.” This time it was Laura Fleishman who spoke up. She was a beautiful girl who always sat in the back row next to a good-looking basketball player named Carl West.

“Nobody says a prayer in my book,” Greg Dixon said.

“Line 35,” Laura Fleishman replied. “That’s no prayer,” Greg Dixon said, “It doesn’t even mention the word God.”

“Read it,” said Buechner. So Laura began to read.

“Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop’d and window’d raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these?”

So Buechner asked the question: “Who are these poor naked wretches he’s praying for, if she’s right that he’s praying?”

Greg Dixon said, “We are.”

Suddenly, writes Buechner, the room was silent and for the first time, the students finally understood what Shakespeare was trying to say.

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

III.

But go a step further. Ecclesiastes not only insists there is such a thing as a right time, he encourages his hearers to develop a sense of discernment that will allow them to know and to act at the right time.

“There is a time to speak,” says Ecclesiastes, “and a time to keep silent.” The ancient philosophers, particularly the Stoics, taught that there was a right time and a wrong time for everything. Philosophy devoted itself to discerning the proper time.

So much of what we do involves proper timing, does it not? When I consult a stockbroker, I want to know, “Is this the time to buy or the time to sell?” A physician once told me that timing is everything in diagnosis. If a patient comes in too early, the complaint is too unspecific, difficult to pinpoint, too vague. But if a patient waits too long, the illness may have progressed too far, and it may be too late for treatment.

One of the books that has caught my attention recently is a book entitled *Lincoln at Gettysburg* by Gary Wills. He makes the point that leaders are not only people with great talents. They are people who have the right talents at the right time. Abraham Lincoln knew that there was a time for war, but he also knew there was a time for peace.

The same was true in England in those dark days of 1940. Neville Chamberlain argued that it was time for peace, a time to appease Hitler, to give him France and the Low Countries. Winston Churchill knew that the time for peace had passed. It was now a time for war.

“There comes a tide in the affairs of men,” writes Shakespeare in his play *Julius Caesar* (Act IV, Scene 3), “which taken at the flood, leads to fortune; omitted all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in series.” In all things—birth, death, love, war, planting and harvesting—there is a right time.

Today of course, we build computer models to tell us the right time. We erect institutes of public policy, hire consultants, and consult astrologers. There is a whole pseudoscience that has emerged called futurism—it is the science of predicting the future—to know the right time.

But all that, says Ecclesiastes, is a lie. “Vanity of vanity,” says the preacher, “all is vanity.”

IV.

There is, then, according to Ecclesiastes, another element in this whole matter of the right time, and it is that where there is a right time for everything, only God can know it for sure (Ecclesiastes 3:11). There are some things that are not in our control precisely because we are not God. “His ways are not our ways,” writes the prophet Isaiah, “and his thoughts not our thoughts.” Hard as we may try, there are times when we don’t know the right time because we are not God.

Karl Barth once observed that the distance between God and humankind is “an infinite qualitative distance.” We normally think of that distinction in terms of knowledge and power, but Ecclesiastes insists that it is also a difference in terms of time.

It would be great wisdom to know the right time. But it is a greater wisdom to accept that there are many things over which we have not real control. Time, the right time, is in God’s hands, not our own.

That is why, when the New Testament speaks of God’s gift to us of Jesus Christ, it speaks in terms of the “right time.” The Apostle Paul writes, “But when the fullness of time had come,” God sent his Son (Galatians 4:4). Or again, in writing to the church at Rome, Paul observes, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Galatians 5:6).

Sometimes I talk with young couples who are considering marriage. They love each other. They want to be married. But the timing is not right. They don’t have enough money. They are not sure about their future. And I say, “Forget it! You will never have enough money.

You will never have enough certainty. Sometimes you have to join hands, close your eyes, and take the risk.”

So what about you? Somewhere within the sound of my voice, there is someone this morning who is facing a very important decision. It may have to do with marriage, a child, or a job. It may have to do with joining a church, or making a commitment to Christ. It may have to do with saying “No” to a destructive habit or addiction.

But I am convinced of one thing. Now is the right time. Now is the right time to say “Yes” to Jesus Christ. Now is the right time to trust God to help you make the best possible decision, trusting that by his grace, all things in your life will be well.

Amen.