

“Having the Time of Your Life”

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-14



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

Sometimes I wonder why certain books got in the Bible. Song of Solomon would be one and Ecclesiastes would be another. Ecclesiastes is rarely quoted in sermons or hymns, except maybe our scripture lesson for today. The Byrds in their 1965 hit, “Turn, Turn, Turn” made the passage more famous than anything else. And preaching on this passage is difficult because it really is well – kind of self-evident. We shake our heads and say, “That’s true” and ask, “So?” Is there any good use of this passage except to read it at funerals, where we hear “There is a time to be born and a time to die?” I do believe God has a word from this passage for us, and so I have entitled this sermon “Having the Time of Your Life.”

Have you thought about just how “time conscious” we are? Where would we be without watches, stopwatches, metronomes, bells to sound the beginning and end of classes, clocking in and clocking out at work, alarm clocks, timers, day timers, and calendars? Seconds and nanoseconds, minutes and hours, days and weeks, months and years, decades, centuries and millennia all measure the flow of our lives and our world. All week long in preparation for this sermon, I thought of the ways we speak of time: half-time, double-time, two-time, time-out, time capsules, part-time, full-time, over-time, on time, having time and wasting time. Every time I sat down a new word or phrase about time would hit me. According to the chorus we just sang and according to one of the bible’s great teachers in our scripture lesson, **“He has made everything beautiful in its time.”** That’s an interesting statement.

If I read that sentence one way, it reminds me that “timing is everything.”

A more and more common thing I see in football games is that a quarterback will seemingly throw the ball straight into the arms of the opposition. I think, “This isn’t hard. The opposing team has different uniforms. You don’t throw straight to them.” I asked Tyler, “Why would any moron throw the ball straight into the arms of the opposing linebacker?” Then Tyler responds, “I know it looks dumb, but it was a timing pattern. He threw the ball to a spot they planned and the receiver never made it there. Had it gone as planned, it would have been six points. It just didn’t work.” We’re all caught in timing patterns: from the running of a relay race, to buying and selling in investments, to expressing affection with our loved ones. The child that wants lots of parental affection when they are alone with parents watching a movie in the living room may not be so desirous of parental affection in front of his or her friends. As the teacher says, “There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain.” Timing is everything. Even the right thing done at the wrong time can lead to disaster.

One of the hardest questions we face is, “Is this the right time?” How do we know when “opportunity is knocking,” “when the window of opportunity is open” and it’s time to move now? Life is full of missed opportunities. In Psalm 90:12, the psalm of Moses reads, **“Teach us to number our days aright, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”** For me that has meant sorting out two often conflicting forces in my life: my anxious fear and the empowerment of God’s Spirit. I have learned the hard way that if fear or desperation are motivating the urgency I feel inside that it is not likely the time to move. If it is the power of God’s Spirit which is motivating me then freedom replaces fear and it is time to move. And isn’t it true

that for most of us the main lesson about time is in patience? Jesus tells the story of the wheat and the tares. The farmer knows there are weeds among the tares, but if he pulls the weeds, he will also pull up the tender young wheat. He will have to wait. The truth is most of us are dominant in one way or another. Some of us are “go for it” people, always pushing people to take advantage of fleeting opportunities. Some of us are “be wise” people, inviting “move it” people to take a second or third look. That’s why we need each other and why we together must listen for the Spirit of God. Everything is beautiful *in its time*.

And some of that wisdom in timing comes with age and experience, just as youthful energy is part of what keeps moving things forward. When the teacher-king, who many think was Solomon, wrote, **“He has made everything beautiful in its time,”** he wrote it late in life. Ecclesiastes is mostly a look back at life. But it’s a reminder to us that much of the beauty of life and the working of God’s plan are only seen in hindsight. In the present, it doesn’t seem beautiful at all. We lose a job and it’s devastating. We look back at that same experience many years later and are grateful that God used that experience to bless our lives. And the things that we sweated so much in the present ended up to be quite small and even inconsequential over time. When we look back over our lives, the maze of confusing choices end up showing the thread of God’s guiding hand. What that means for me is that God is faithful and trustworthy in the times of our lives. When we are having to decide between that which is good and best or bad and worst, God will still work it out in the end. He makes everything beautiful *in its time*.

But there is a nagging question for this passage of scripture. Is the statement even true? “Is everything beautiful in its time?” Is the old 1970 Ray Stevens song right, “Everything is beautiful in its own way?” Is there a time to kill (vs.3), a time to hate (vs. 8), and a time for war? (vs. 8) And even if we say there is and can give justifiable reasons to do so (and I think we can), what is beautiful about that? I grieve that there is so much killing and hatred and war in the world, so much rending. I sometimes ask the Lord, “Why do you let us act this way?” More than that, I grieve that I live in a society that has glorified those things and desensitized itself to the realities of them in its music, media, books, art, etc.

One of the fun things about serving the South Plains College students lunch, which the staff did last Tuesday, is to read the various shirts as they come through, some humorous, some off-color and some serious. They’re great conversation starters. One young lady came through with a US Navy sweatshirt. I asked the obvious, “Are you going to the Navy?” She said, “No, I’m going to the Army. We lost my brother to the Navy. At first I thought she was doing a little rivalry between the branches there. So I said, “You did.” She said, “Yes, we lost him in a training accident.” Is there anything beautiful about that?

I almost would end this scripture reading at verses 9-10,

What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men.”

I fear that we read Ecclesiastes 3 and read into those verses a justification for it all, saying “that’s just the way life is.” The passage describes life as it is experienced, that we experience life in the tension of these polar opposites: birth and death, embracing and not embracing, weeping and laughing, war and peace. But let’s not allow the fact of that to make us passive.

Jesus came to this world to present a different kind of kingdom in which there is no time to kill, to hate, to tear apart or make war. It is a kingdom that is life-giving, loving, and reconciling and peaceable. And if I read Jesus correctly, we the church are to be continual witnesses of that kingdom. There is a fatalism inside the book of Ecclesiastes that we need to keep in balance with the rest of scripture. We don’t just “eat, drink and be merry.” (Ecclesiastes 3) We don’t just “remember our creator in the days of our youth”, because later life stinks (Ecclesiastes 12). Similarly, there is a fatalism inside the church that keeps us from “fighting the

good fight of faith” for a better and different world. We throw up our hands and say, “That’s just the way life is” and decide that this is a time to be silent, when it is really a time to speak and to act, when its time to be the kingdom. Several interpreters of Ecclesiastes believe that the book is really about life that is distant from God.

If that is the case, then verses like “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth” and “God makes everything beautiful in its time” really stand out. Paul writes in Romans 8:28,

In everything, God works for good, for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

That doesn’t mean that everything is good. It means that whether it’s good or bad, God works for good. Everything is not beautiful, but God can make beauty even in the ugliest of situations. Paul writes that we are to be people who **“redeem the time for the days are evil.”** Time, in a sense, is one of the few constants in our lives. So it is how we see our time and what we do with it that makes the difference.

There was an old Norwegian who kept very careful notes of his life in a series of notebooks. On his eightieth birthday, he pulled the notebooks from a shelf and began to compute his life. He was surprised to find that he had spent five of his eighty years waiting for people. He had spent six months tying neckties, three months scolding children, and eight days telling dogs to lie down and be quiet.

What would a notebook like that say about us? So much of life is busy time (filling our lives with constant activity and having little to show for it) or worse, zombie time (hours spent with that which cannot love us and, for the most part, does not make like or society better). The big question is, “Will you and I use our time redemptively?” Will our lives be “in his time,” or will it be just about “my time?” Will it be used in a way that adds meaning to people’s lives and will time be used to make a difference for good in your world? The philosopher William James once said, “The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”

And that brings me to what may be the most important part of our scripture lesson. The teacher-king writes just after “God has made everything beautiful in its time:”

“He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

Just two weeks ago, we celebrated “the communion of the saints” and remembered loved ones who have died in the past year. It was a reminder to us not only of our mortality and that we have been touched by people whom we have loved and have loved us, but also that all our lives are lived against the backdrop of eternity. I have heard it said that there are two kinds of extreme Christians. There are those who are so earthly that they’re no heavenly good. And there are those who are so heavenly that they’re no earthly good. I want to suggest that healthy Christianity is the kind in which people spend their time doing earthly things that result in heavenly good. In so doing, we do end up “having the time of our lives”, lives of meaning, joy, and hope. We end up “having the time of our lives” both now and forever.