

SERMON
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“The Gift of Today”

August 5, 2018

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Most of you know that I have spent the last 6 weeks in Halifax, studying at Atlantic School of Theology. And it feels good to be back in Ontario. I know that I have managed to avoid the heat wave that you had back here, the weather was certainly not the same in Halifax. In fact, when many of you have asked me how the weather was out east, I usually reply:

“well you know, we can have three seasons in one day on the east coast”.

I would wake in the morning to a deep blanket of fog that meant I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me – then by noon the sun had broken through and it was often a glorious summer day with a balmy sea breeze; by the evening, when the sun had gone down, there was often a chill to the air making me grab a jacket or sweater – and I would always carry an umbrella for the rain. Three seasons in one day!

One of the most delightful gifts that God has given us in this part of the world is the changing seasons. If any of you have ever lived in parts of the world when there is just a rainy or a dry season – then you know what I mean. Here, we are blessed with a wonderful variety in the changing colors, textures, sounds and temperatures. In spring there is new life, fresh green growth and a warming sun. The colours and the sounds are soft and gentle – I don't need to tell all you farmers how the spring rains bring nourishment to the roots and shoots that begin to burst from the once dead ground. I know, as a gardener, Spring is my favorite season.

Then summer is the time for growing and developing. Suddenly nature is full of activity: creation seems to be flying, running, pushing and leaping into newness all around us. Colours are rich and luxuriant. If I could of, I would have shown you a picture of the amazing rhododendrons that were in bloom in Halifax – magnificent bushes full of purple, pink or deep crimson red. And the sounds of summer provide a background of music for our pleasure – we have a cardinal in our garden at home that wakes us up every morning around 6.30am – which is a much nicer sound than the loud seagulls outside my window in Halifax! Or maybe you enjoy the sounds on the warm summer nights of cicadas buzzing, even bullfrogs croaking. In the season of summer, it feels like the birds calling to one another, and the insects buzzing and humming are the happy voices that fill the air.

In the autumn season, the colours change as the leaves turn from green to a rainbow of fire. I remember when I first came from England, and the first time that I saw a brilliant red Canadian Maple tree – it's a spectacular sight that we may sometimes take for granted. And the autumn brings bountiful harvests of red apples, orange pumpkins, green cucumbers, and yellow corn. The sounds of autumn are the rustling leaves as the autumn breeze calls them to dance and play.

Then there is the season of winter – a time to bring rest and quiet to the land. Colours are more subdued: often a blanket of whiteness covers our world. Don't worry - I won't say that 's' word on our mid-summer holiday weekend. In winter, the smell of wood smoke fills our nostrils. The pace of life slows as nature gathers energy for another season of growth.

The human landscape also has its seasons.

The passage from Ecclesiastes is one that is often read at memorial services, because it is one that reminds us of the seasons in our lives. Spring is likened to infancy and early childhood with new life bursting, ready to blossom and develop. If any of you have been looking after grandchildren or children during the holidays, then you know all about the energy of young lives.

The summer is like a time of growth, learning, and the promise of maturity yet to come. We have a teenager at home, with one year until he heads off to University; as he plans for this future, it seems like our house is often in the summer stage. The promise of things to come.

Autumn is the time of harvest – the time of our mature years when we enjoy the people around us, and the material things we have acquired – a time of life that some of us might go on cruises and head south for winter.

And winter, is like our final years, when we lead quieter lives, slowing down a little – although I'll be honest, I don't see some of our seniors at Knox slowing much (Betty Vanderlip!) . But our winter season in life is about enjoying and remembering the richness of our past experiences.

I have been thinking a lot about this cyclical nature of our lives when I was away studying - thinking about another season and year at Knox. The pattern can also be found in the short-term cycles of our lives. We approach new experiences with the hope and promise of Springtime, looking ahead to different patterns or situations. The United Church is currently in a time of Spring – the General Council have just voted on a complete restructure of our denomination, it is like a time of spring cleaning as we look at what to keep and what to change. Ecclesiastes 3:6-7 reminds us that it is:

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew; (Ecc. 3:6-7)

But, very soon, beginning in January 2019, we will be moving into a new season; moving into our season of Summer. We will be learning to live in new situations, new governance, embracing new opportunities, growth in new directions. Changes may be hard at first. It will be:

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance; (v.4)

But God is with us on this new adventure. God wants us to enjoy the fruits of our hard work as we move into a season of Autumn, and a time to harvest. Ecclesiastes is often referred to as being part of the wisdom scriptures. And the words of wisdom in verse 13 tell us:

it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all our toil.

Now that is not an invitation to eat and drink in excess – although that might happen too during a summer at the cottage! But this scripture is a reminder that we will have a time to enjoy what we have worked for or accomplished in our new adventures with God.

And as we move forward we will need to need to take time to pause and evaluate along the way. We will need:

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak (v.7)

We will need a time of winter – a time of slowing down for renewal and revisioning again.

And this message is for all of us, whether we are part of the United Church, or from other denominations. As each of us moves forward with the seasons of our lives - Let us remember that God is with us on our journeys. There is well known saying that you have probably heard of:

Yesterday is history,

tomorrow is a mystery,

today is a gift, that's why it is called the present!

Let us claim that gift today, remembering all the goodness that God has given to enrich our lives. And as we journey through the cyclical seasons, may we each claim God's promise that comes from the wisdom in Ecclesiastes:

I know that whatever God does endures forever (v.14)

Amen.