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Ecclesiastes 3

What Season Is It Anyway?

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If I had my way, I would live on a warm, tropical beach. Beach people need ministers too, right? An endless supply of warm, sunny days, spent with sand between my toes sounds really good to me. Often, when I share this desire with people, they confirm that they like beaches too, but they wouldn't want to live in a place where there aren't visible, marked changes in the season. They say they would miss the spring rains and signs of new life, the fall colors, and even the snow. I like changes of seasons, but I like the beach more.

This time of year, it seems like the seasons of summer and fall sort of collide. The temperatures outside tell us it is still pool and fruity drink season, but the public pools have already closed and now that the children are spending their days in classrooms, the neighborhood pools and even our backyard kiddie pools have been abandoned. In fact, we had one day in the 70s this week and I saw on social media that a friend was considering putting on a sweatshirt. Yet, today it still feels very much like cherry limeade season, but if our Starbucks wasn't closed for remodel, we would know that pumpkin spice season started there this week. Stores are displaying Halloween decorations, but our summer flowers (at least the ones that survived the extreme heat) are still very much in bloom. Is it fall? Is it summer? These days feel a little bit like the "brunch" of seasons feels...not quite summer and not really fall.

Seasons bring rhythm to life. Beyond the seasons caused by the tilt of the earth's axis, there are seasons of our lives in which we grow and change and hopefully we gather a little wisdom along the way. Like the summer-fall seasonal collision we are currently experiencing, sometimes as we transition from one season of life to the next, it feels like a bit of a collision as well. I remember dropping off our youngest at college and realizing the house was going to be very quiet. As I left him in his dorm room, it was the weirdest thing...I was looking at a 6'4" young man, but I felt like I was dropping off a toddler at a stranger's house. And I have known friends who have struggled as retirement approached, wondering what they will do, concerned they won't find their purpose. It was time to not do what they had been doing, but they weren't ready to embrace weeks where every day

felt like Saturday yet. It's complicated and all we can hope is that the wisdom we gather along the way helps us to transition gracefully between seasons.

In the Hebrew Bible there is comfort for all of us who are transitioning into or preparing to transition into a new season. This is perhaps one of the most familiar passages in the Hebrew Bible, so the following translation from the Inclusive Bible may be different than what you remember. This is Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8.

There is a time for everything, a season for every purpose under heaven:

a season to be born and a season to die;
a season to plant and a season to harvest;
a season to hurt and a season to heal;
a season to tear down and a season to build up;
a season to cry and a season to laugh;
a season to mourn and a season to dance;
a season to scatter stones and a season to gather them;
a season for holding close and a season for holding back;
a season to seek and a season to lose;
a season to keep and a season to throw away;
a season to tear and a season to mend;
a season to be silent and a season to speak;
a season to love and a season to hate;
a season for hostilities and a season for peace.

Ecclesiastes was likely written in the late 300s BCE. The author is unknown but refers to themselves as "teacher." This text is one of three books in the Hebrew Bible called Wisdom Literature. Some scholars include the book of Psalms or some of the psalms and Song of Songs in this group. Other scholars cast an even wider net and lump all texts that are not historical or prophetic in nature into this group. Generally, wisdom literature does not talk about the history of Israel, its major institutions of covenant and kingship, and its great personalities, like Abraham and Moses. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the name of Israel's God, Yahweh, doesn't even appear.

As the name suggests, in Wisdom Literature, the word "wisdom" permeates all the books: forty-two times in Proverbs, eighteen times in Job, and twenty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. The numbers are much higher if we include synonyms for "wisdom." Wisdom texts comprise some of the most ancient literature. Parallels

to biblical wisdom literature can be found in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite traditions. Contained in the wisdom texts are instructions for the way humans should live and relate to other people and God; there are proverbs and pithy sayings, dialogues on divine justice, and human suffering, and encouragement to follow a specific philosophy or embrace life's certainties.

Today's text fits very much into that last category, reminding us that a life of wisdom includes an *acknowledgement* that there is a season for everything and the *ability to discern* which season it is right now and act accordingly. That seems like a tall order in this time and place that seems a chaotic and unpredictable and in which we spend a good deal of time wondering why people, maybe including ourselves, don't just act right.

You may have noticed the translation I read from The Inclusive Bible chose the word "season" rather than the word "time" for the list which makes up the majority of the reading. I like the use of "season" because it highlights the difference between time in a quantitative sense; chronological time, that we can divide into minutes and years and qualitative time, the kind of is measured by what happens. Our seasons of life are defined by experiences than how long they last.

As we think about there being a season for everything, we can't help but wonder, how we are supposed to behave in the messiness of life when those seasons collide, when we are grieving a tremendous loss, and a grandchild is born, when we feel like laughing, and there are so many reasons to cry. In some respects, that's where the wisdom part comes in. I think a situational ethic in which compassion, for ourselves and other people, has to be applied, an awareness that all seasons are part of life, and we know from experience that sometimes they overlap and that's okay.

On one hand, we can find some comfort in the teacher's assurance that there is a season for everything; a rhythm of life that that keeps things organized. On the other hand, except for the first clause on the teacher's list, "a season to be born and a season to die," which is, for the most part, out of our human hands, the rest of the list involves humans making choices. And the truth is, whenever humans have the opportunity to choose, we have the opportunity to get it wrong.

All we can do is learn from our mistakes because when we know better, we do better.

So, let's talk about the rest of the list.

Anyone who has ever tried to grow anything has experienced the wisdom of “a season to plant and a season to harvest.” In climates like ours, the sweet spot for planting is the one day between the last freeze and the 60 consecutive days of 100-degree temperatures. These first two pairings—“a time to be born and a time to die” and “a time to plant and a time to harvest”—represent beginnings and endings, new life, and the inevitability of death. Plant life starts with planting but ends at harvest, just as life begins when we are born and ends when we die. The difference between these two clauses is that the timing of planting and harvesting is our choice, while being born and dying are generally not. Although, in this time and place, I recognize a robust conversation could be held about a human being's right to choose when they will die.

“A season to hurt and a season to heal,” is generally translated, “a season to kill and a season to heal,” and can be a way of thinking about society's response to a person's transgressions. In ancient Israel, illness was seen as a punishment from God. There was the sense, in certain circumstances, that nothing should be done for the “sinner” as they deserved whatever they got, up to and including death. I like the translation in the Inclusive Bible, though, not necessarily because it is the most accurate, but because it gives us the opportunity to consider that there are seasons in life that hurt and, I wish it wasn't true, dear ones, but suffering is part of life. Our dog died almost two months ago, and it still hurts every time I walk in the door of our home and he isn't there to welcome me. I am reminded every day, as I hurt, how very lucky we were to be his pets. Amid the sadness, I know I am healing. It's messy. We can be and feel hurt and be in the process of healing at the same time. Sometimes seasons overlap in beautiful ways.

“A season to tear down and a season to build up...”

There is a lot written and said about saying and doing things that build one another up rather than saying and doing things that tear each other down, especially in the realms of parenting, leadership, and within friendships. In that context, we might wonder, when would be a season to tear down? I can't think of a time when tearing someone down is in keeping with our call to care for one

another. But I do believe we are called to leave not only other human beings, but the world, better than we found it and sometimes that means things must be torn down on the way to something better. When I was a youth minister, I took some junior high students to Detroit on a mission trip. Our job was to tear down blighted houses to create green space. The neighborhoods were better for it, though my back was not. The Berlin Wall needed to be torn down to build a liberated, united Germany. I've said more times than I can count, as people of God, I believe we are called to tear down walls and build bridges, metaphorically and sometimes physically.

In the pairings, "A season to cry and a season to laugh; a season to mourn and a season to dance," the teacher contrasts a funeral gathering and a celebratory feast such as a wedding. The general idea is that we weep and mourn at funerals and laugh and dance at weddings. We know it isn't that simple though. I know many a parent who has cried at a child's wedding for many reasons. And I have had the privilege of officiating funerals that were the healing combination of laughter through tears. There is a season for all our big feelings, all our celebrations; celebrations of love and life and celebrations of death. A wise person can see when our mourning keeps us from living and when laughter rings hollow in the face of real pain.

"A season to scatter stones and season to gather them," is a strict parallel to what follows, "A season to hold close and a season to hold back." Both are ancient world metaphors for sex, and in that world, sex was about having offspring. From a biological standpoint, there is a season for that, but we know there is more to family than biology. For so many of us, our chosen family plays a bigger role in our lives than our biological family. Whoever we choose, however we choose to configure our families, if we are wise, we will make healthy choices.

The picture on this slide is a bit misleading. This verse is less about a Maria Kondo organizing session or freedom from hoarding, and more about prudence and providence. We should know there is a time to receive and when it is time to give. The teacher tells us there are times we must accept help and times when we are called to be generous, sharing what we have to help others. Wisdom tells us when enough is enough and when it is too much.

More references to mourning are in this pairing. The rituals around mourning were and are an important part of Judaism. In the ancient world, it was customary for families to tear their clothes as an expression of mourning upon the death of a family member. When the mourning period was over, the families were authorized to sew their garments. Silence was also an appropriate expression of grief. A wise person knows when to speak and when to be silent.

To expand on that, I can think of two sayings about silence, "Silence is golden," and "The silence is deafening." The first I grew accustomed to hearing as a child when my parents were trying to teach me that I didn't have to say everything that popped into my mind. And the second saying reminds me that when we do not use our voices to call out injustice, the ones who are oppressed experience our silence as a loud message, our silence is deafening.

The final pairing, "A season to love and a season to hate," and "A season for hostilities (or the more common translation-war) and a season for peace," raise up these very human experiences. Sadly, hate and hostility have always been a part of the human experience and it is always a choice for the one doing the hating and acting with hostility.

Here's the cool thing that happens here though. Look at this final clause and note the teacher reversed the order of hostilities and peace. We would expect, since love comes first in the love and hate clause, that peace would come first in the final clause. Instead "peace" is placed in sort of the punchline position, "peace" has the last word.

And if we return to the beginning of the text we see, in our list that being born has the first word. Birth and peace bracket the whole list, while death and war are demoted to realities that, though profound and universal, have neither the first nor the last word.

And truer words have never been spoken. Our God who created and loves all of us is doing God's part, creating new life, fresh starts and second, third and fourth chances. But the rest of it is up to us; the rest we have choices about. We choose what kind of a world this is and what kind of world it will be. If we are wise, we will use every season, the hard ones, the easy ones, the ones we are prepared for and the ones we aren't, we will use them to bring about peace or, the better word, the original Hebrew word, shalom. Shalom is a much richer word than

peace. It means so much more. It means wholeness, well-being, belonging, love, justice...all the good stuff smushed together. If we choose well, that is what the seasons of our lives will bring...from the very first season to the very last...and every season in between.

May this season...whatever season it is for you, be everything it can be, for you and the world.