



September 16, 2007

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8  
**Knowing the Time**  
M. Craig Barnes

How often have you heard someone ask, "Do you know the time?" The Bible perceives this as a profoundly theological question.

+++

When I was just barely a teenager, in 1969 the rock group Chicago released the song "Does Anybody Know What Time It Is?" It's a song about people who all have watches but don't really know the time. "People running around everywhere. Don't know the way to go... Don't know where I am. Have no time to look around. Just run around, run around, and think why?" The problem with learning those songs when you're young is they take up room in your head, and you can never get rid of the lyrics once they are there. So I thought of this song often this week as I worked through our text from Ecclesiastes. And I wondered, does anybody really know what time it is?

Ecclesiastes belongs with the books of Proverbs and Job to a genre of the Old Testament known as Wisdom Literature. Unlike the rest of the OT, it has little interest in Israel's unique history with God. It says nothing about the Patriarchs, the Red Sea crossing, the wilderness, or the Promised Land. Nor is it concerned with the law, with the temple, or even with worship. Rather than telling its story with prophets and priests who have visions and see miracles, Ecclesiastes is written by a simple teacher who relies only on keen observations, years of experience, and accumulated wisdom. But this wisdom is also perceived as a gift from God. Jesus Christ invoked this wisdom tradition when he said things like: "Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." Ecclesiastes pays close attention to life and draws insights for understanding it. No insight is more profound than its notion of time.

The teacher in Ecclesiastes claims that time comes to us only in the moment we have. This moment is holy because it comes from God who fills it with sacred meaning, content, specific experiences, and specific opportunities. "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 weep and a time to laugh... A time to mourn and a time to dance." So it is wise to know what time it is.

Wisdom literature has no sense of time in the abstract but only the time of the present. It doesn't even think of time as linear but as vertical because eternity is always breaking into the present. By contrast, we think of time as a long line with the past behind us, and the wide open future ahead of us. Knowing we cannot do anything to change the past, we devote ourselves to changing the future. This is why we work hard for a better life, why we raise our children with a very specific view of their future, and why we plan and knock ourselves out determined to make tomorrow better than today. But all of that makes us anxious and frantic about that future. This is the reason that we "have no time to look around, just run around, run around." And nobody knows what time it is. The teacher in Ecclesiastes warns us, "You are missing the present tense, which is the only one you have. You are missing your holy moments."

In the previous church I served, one of my colleagues on the pastoral staff and his wife suffered the untimely death of their son David who was in his twenties. I will never forget that funeral, mostly because of the eulogy delivered by David's father. He stood in the pulpit and spoke about how hard he worked when David was a child to instill in him the sense of delayed gratification. He said, "I just kept telling him, 'Work today, enjoy tomorrow.'" Then he chuckled as he said, "David never understood the concept." It was the source of most of their arguments. "Delayed gratification," David would tease, "What is that, Dad?" But now at the funeral his father claimed, "I'm so glad David didn't delay his gratification in life. And I only wish I hadn't delayed so much of mine as a father."

Life only comes in the present season, Ecclesiastes claims. It is a holy season, a sacred moment. You don't want to miss it racing for tomorrow.

Some of the seasons of life are not chosen. No one would choose the time to weep, or the time to mourn, or the time to die. For that matter, no one chooses the time to be born. The Wisdom teacher dismantles any cherished notions we have today that life is a blank slate, and we can write on it what we will. God alone is sovereign, and God's ways can never be fully understood by us. No one has ever adequately explained why a parent has to bury a child. And no one gets to avoid the wintry season of mourning. Sooner or later it comes for us all. We don't choose it; it chooses us.

Some of the seasons of life we do get to choose. "There is a time to mourn and a time to dance," the text says. You don't get to choose when you must mourn, but you do get to choose when it is time to dance again. "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh." Things happen to you that make you weep, but you decide when you are out of tears and ready to laugh again. "There is a time to love and a time to hate." Typically we fall in love. It isn't something we can put in our strategic plans. So we don't really choose love. But we alone have power over our choice to hate. God will never choose hate for you.

What is the Wisdom Teacher's point? Yes, God is sovereign, and many of the changes of life are thrust upon us. But this is not fatalistic determinism because we still have the freedom to make our own choices about our life. We can choose to live into the season we have been given, and look for the traces of holiness that can be found in all moments. We can choose not to be victims when terrible things are thrust upon us. In the words of Simone Weil, "Victimization is a waste of suffering." Choose instead to dig deep into your hurts to find the promised presence of God. Also, we can choose to turn our mourning into dancing and our weeping into laughter.

It is striking that just a few verses after our text, Ecclesiastes claims, "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."(3:13) This is an echo of what it says in the verses just before the text: "Eat, drink, and find joy in your toil."(2:24) Finding joy through the toil of life's changing seasons is a central theme of Ecclesiastes. "Eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart."(9:7)

How do we find this joy when we are not even in control of the seasons of life? Ah, the Wisdom Teacher cautions, joy is found not in controlling life, which he calls a vanity and an illusion. Joy is found in your response to life, the only thing you can control.

This is the great sacred drama that Ecclesiastes portrays for us. God is the initiator. We are the responders. This is not different from the rest of the biblical witness that claims God is the author of grace, which means God takes the initiative. We respond to that grace, even when it seems severe, with acts of faith. And frankly, even that faith is a gift from God. If you are tired of weeping, God can give you the courage to laugh again. If you are tired of slowly dying, God can bring you back to life.

A while back I had lunch with a man who was an alcoholic, but he had been sober for many years. I said, "It must be great being sober for so long." He responded, "Yeah, I guess, but all of my worst fears of sobriety have proven true. I could never have done this on my own. I'm not sober because I wanted to be, but because God chose to save me. I just choose to say yes, every day, to such grace." Well, there it is—choosing to say yes to the grace of life today. That is how we find joy.

Isn't it fascinating that every time the Wisdom Teacher describes this joy, he doesn't depict great achievements or accomplished goals. All of that he considers to be chasing after the wind. Instead, he depicts joy with the most common things like eating, laughing, dancing, and loving. Those are all things that you can only do in the present tense. They are all things that are endowed with more holiness than we can see. Eating, laughing, dancing, and loving—all things that were going on at a small wedding in Cana where the guests didn't realize that God was with them. Amen.