

Sermon Archive 325

Sunday 27 December, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15

Matthew 11: 25-29

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I mention the quiet One, who often is missed, while we get busy with life. He walks with the weary, and carries the burdens, and helps us grow. I mention him in passing, and he'll fade away for a while. When will we see him again?

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Within Protestant theology, there's this concept the Germans call Heilsgeschichte, which we call "salvation history". It's a belief, kind of, that human history, the times in which we live, is this canvas upon which God writes heaven's purposes. Each of our days, unfolding one by one, is clay in the hands of the potter, God calling ordinary things into extraordinary purposes in time. God took yesterday's breakfast, God takes today's lunch, God will take tomorrow's dinner, and turn it all into something resembling progress. The purposes of God seize the moments of our days, and some grand plan emerges.

That's an over-simplification, of course. If you're trying to read God's great progress on a Good Friday, or on a Holy Saturday, on the day of your appointment at the gas chamber, or a day of the Little Boy's drop on Hiroshima, you're not likely to spot too much progress. Jesus will seem defeated, we will seem defeated, and God will seem dead.

And indeed, at various times, it's not been easy to look at the times, and say "God is making progress".

Something of that. may have been captured by Ecclesiastes. His major contribution to human wisdom is that human experience involves all manner of things in time. There's a time for being born and a time for dying. There's a time to plant things, and a time to pluck things up. There's a time to build, and a time to pull things down. There's a time for laughing, and a time for crying. There's a time for all manner of opposites, which you might imagine cancel each

other out - or at least argue with one another. Life isn't a simple line of progress from here to there. It's a journey through the opposites, dare we say life challenging life, now challenging another now, obvious advance challenging subtle regress, spiritual growth challenging the idea of linear progress.

While stepping back into a wide frame might give us a sense of history from the eye of God, generally Ecclesiastes is as close as we get to perspective in the scheme of the things of God. That scheme is that life is made up of lots of things, and there seems to be time for them all to squash in together. Yes, we have a sense of past and future in our minds, but they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. Close to the unfolding action of our times, that's about the way it goes.

Well, how about the year through which we've now just lived? 2020?

2020 was the year of Covid 19. At the beginning, I called it Coronavirus, then learned it was a particular strain called Covid 19 - "19" not because it was the nineteenth strain, but because it was detected in 2019. It was a year when we said goodbye to physical friends and family for a while, and went into lockdown. Native birds and re-calibration of the sounds of our city. It was a year when we learned to work differently. It was also a year, when after we relaxed the supermarket social distancing protocols, I found myself angered and resentful at people who were coming too close to me. I'd never experienced that before - fear of physical contact. It was a year of working out how to be responsible while trying to reclaim things like singing together and sharing the common cup. It was a year during which we enjoyed doing business by email and ZOOM, then came to miss real human interaction. For everything there was a season.

2020 was the year in which Donald Trump, finally, reluctantly, petulantly like the man-child we'd come to know, lost the U.S. Presidential election. After four years of the worst, most divisive and destructive politics, an electoral process finally removed from the body-democracy a cancer. A one-time guest preacher at Knox, an American Presbyterian from San Francisco, said "I feel like, for the first time in four years, I can breathe". Another American commentator [Anthony Kapel Van Jones] said "It's easier to be a parent this morning; it's easier to be a dad; it's easier to tell your kids that character matters, that telling the truth matters; that being a good person matters" The rulers rise, and rule, or fail to rule, then fall. A time to kill, and a time to

heal. For everything there was a season.

A story of two trees. As part of a state run Arbour Day programme in 1974, a ten or eleven year old Matthew plants a Rimu tree in the grounds of his Primary School. The tree grows tall and strong. It becomes magnificent, until the carpark down from its hill needs to expand, and in expanding takes out half of the tree's root system. As the tree planter visits his tree in 2020, he sees it's dying (a time to be born, and a time to die). Every time the car will "take out" the tree. The car will always win. Meditating upon this, the tree-planter decides not to protest or complain, but to buy a new Rimu to live for the old murdered one. He presents it to the school, with the challenge to the school to find a current boy called Matthew to plant it. The Primary School, in a stroke of genius, finds **four** Matthews to plant the replacement. 2020. A year of ecological disaster, followed by an act of improvement, followed by a doubling down of improvement. A tree grows - four boys are moved to care for a tree. For everything there was a season.

At the beginning of the year, we had to shut down much of the Knox Centre, so it could be earthquake strengthened. Bloody earthquakes! On Wednesday evening, the Council of Knox Church held its last meeting for the year in the recently re-opened Hall. We turned on the lights, and they were dazzling. We felt the strength. We knew that we now were enjoying and offering a space that was safe. After the meeting we celebrated communion in the chapel. Over both these events there was a sense of the quakes now being behind us. 2020 was a horrible year, but by the end of it, there was, in the state of our Knox Centre, something really significant being put behind us. As we step away from 2020, we cut loose the clinging earthquake bits. Oh, and your minister of almost seven years service now, saw the foyer, for the first time, without any bits and pieces being stored there. He saw a big, open, ready space for gathering. A time to mourn, and a time to dance. For everything there was a season.

In 2020, a gas-fitter was sentenced with respect to bungled work he'd done in 2019. A bad day at work caused the total destruction of a neighbourhood in Northwood. I felt sorry for the people whose houses were destroyed. I also felt sorry for a man whose moment of inattention caused such awful destruction. Maybe that's moment for us to consider the responsibilities we hold - and the need to take them seriously. Every time we operate a vehicle. Every time we speak impatiently to someone who might be on the edge. Every time we don't say "no" to racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic

comments we hear. Grave responsibilities undermined by inattention. Be careful about doing the right thing - avoiding the wrong thing. There is a time to keep silence, but also a time to speak. For everything there was a season.

Then there was the election at home - with many (indeed most) saying "yes" to another term for our government. Was that "yes" to Covid containment? Was it "yes" to the politics of kindness? Was it "yes" to a young woman who has stood in contrast to the truth-averse old men of other nations? Not sure! The figures were strong. 2020 as a year for confirming confidence in the steering of our waka. A time to throw away, and also a time to keep. For everything there was a season.

The theologian in me wants to affirm that every day is a gift from God - full of possibilities for seeing God, following God, for being blessed by God. I put my noble belief in the sacredness, and divine possibility of all time next to the common belief that this year has been a total dunger. It was hard and horrible, and many of us are pleased to see it ending.

Soon, we will release this year, cosign it to the past. We're well acquainted with thoughts about how it might have been better. But maybe, in the wider scheme of salvation history, in the bigger picture of God, eventually we'll be able to see this year in a different perspective.

I mentioned the quiet One, who often is missed, while we get busy with life, gathering our stones and throwing them apart, rending the fabric and sewing it together again. That quiet One walks with the weary, and carries the burdens, and helps us grow. I mentioned him in passing, and he faded away for a while. When will we see him again?

May God enable us to treasure the time that we have been given, and to see through the conflicting claims of Ecclesiastes, a fine and gracious company at hand.

We'll see how that goes. And in the meantime, we'll keep a moment of quiet.