

TIME TO DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU

Sermon, January 17, 2016

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-14; John 2:1-11

When I was a ninth grader, the popular rock band Chicago (*whose full name was the Chicago Transit Authority*) released the hit song, "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?" Many of you know it; it's a song about people who all have watches but don't really know the time. "... a pret-ty lady looked at me and said her diamond watch had stopped cold dead, and I sa-a-id, 'Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? And so I can't imagine why, we've all got time enough to cry ...'" The problem with learning those songs when you're young is they take up room in your head, and they just stay there year after year taking up space! This song often comes humming out of my subconscious almost every time I read this familiar passage from Ecclesiastes. "Does anybody really know what time it is?"

"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." Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Job belong to a genre of the Old Testament known as the Wisdom Literature. The writer of Ecclesiastes pays close attention to life and draws his inspired insights for understanding it. And perhaps no insight is more profound than his notion of time. The teacher in Ecclesiastes asserts in so many words that time comes to us only in the moment, the "season," we have. Each present moment should be considered holy because it comes from God Who fills it with sacred meaning, content, specific experiences, and special opportunities. The teacher in Ecclesiastes would warn us, "Don't miss the present tense, which is the only one you have. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow does not exist, and all we really have is the present ... so live it well!" Life comes to us in the present season. It is a holy season, a sacred moment, that you don't want to miss because you are either fretting about yesterday or too preoccupied with tomorrow, being, as Chicago would sing, "... people trying to beat clock for oh I don't know, I don't know, I don't know-oh, and I said ..."

To be sure, some of these seasons of life are forced upon us; we do not choose them. No one in their right mind would choose the time to die, the time to weep, the time to mourn. Let me state the obvious, that no one in my family would have chosen this time to mourn, we would not have chosen for my Dad to come to "the time to die" January 2. For that matter, no one chooses their time to be born; none of us in this room had very much to do with our individual births. We are just not in control of all our seasons. God alone is sovereign, and God's ways can never be fully understood by us ... which, by the way, is something of a recurring theme in the Wisdom Literature. We just don't always know why things happen when and/or how they happen; our finite minds cannot fully grasp the infinite workings of a sovereign God. No one gets to avoid the wintry season of mourning. Sooner or later it comes for us all. We don't choose it; you might more accurately say it chooses us.

However, some seasons of life we do get to choose. "There is a time to mourn and a time to dance," the text says. We may not get to choose when we mourn, but we DO get to choose when it is time to get up and dance again. "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh." Yes, things do happen that make us weep, but we can choose when it is time to laugh again. "There is a time to love and a time to hate." This one is a bit tricky, because on one hand, we do choose to love. More often than not, love is an act of the will, or else it could not be commanded for us to do. We choose to do loving actions, we choose by an act of the will to honor our promises to love. On the other hand, though, love is something that sort of happens to us. We *fall* in love. It isn't something we can always put in our strategic plans (*just ask my son, falling in love came very "inconveniently" for him while he was in Israel this summer. The delightful young lady who is the source of this attraction happens to go to college on the other side of this continent, in Spokane. She also comes from the coast of another continent ... she was actually raised on a boat off the coast of West Africa, a mission hospital ship, where her selfless and dedicated parents have served three decades; her dad is a maxillofacial surgeon and her mom is a chief office administrator. The ship is currently docked in Madagascar, where she went "home" for the winter break from college.*¹ All of this has thrown a complicated but delightful geographical monkey wrench into Steve's plans for his future after graduation this May!). So we don't really always choose the "season" of love, although love, ultimately, is an act of the will. Hate is a choice, as well, although we can't always control what causes us to hate. And yes, there is a time for hate; there are things that we really should hate (*which is almost another sermon*). But we can choose to control our hate, channeling it for constructive, not destructive, purposes.

I could go on all morning with the various segments of this chapter, but I just want to hit on this point. Many of the seasons of life are thrust upon us with no choice of our own. But by God's grace we still have the freedom to make our own choices about our *responses* to the present season. We can choose to live into the season we have been given, and look for the 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." Suffering can make us *bitter*, or it can make us *better*... if we choose to seek for the presence of God, Who has made everything ...

¹ To learn more about Mercy Ships and to "meet" this remarkable family, see this segment that ran on *60 Minutes* in 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4rmbcU9Jxo> OR visit www.mercyships.org

EVERYTHING ... beautiful, *in its time*. The teacher tells us joy is found not in controlling life, which he calls a vanity and an illusion. Joy is found in your **response** to life, which is the one thing you can control. It's the old "10-90 Principle:" 10% of life is made up of what happens to you; 90% of life is decided by how you react. We really have no control over 10% of what happens to us. But we do have a measure of control over how we will respond, and how we respond has a profound effect over everything else that follows.

One more quick thing: just about every time the Wisdom Teacher describes joy, he doesn't talk about it being found in great achievements or accomplished goals; all of that he considers to be chasing the wind. Instead, he depicts joy with the most common things like eating, laughing, dancing, and loving. Verse 13: "*It is God's gift that men should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.*" Chapter 2 verse 24: "*Eat, drink, and find joy in your toil.*" Chapter 9, verse 7: "*Eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart.*" Those are all things we do in the present tense, things that are endowed with more holiness than we can see. Eating, laughing, dancing, loving — all things that were going on at a small wedding in Cana where the guests didn't realize that God was right there with them, in the midst of their present moment.

John tells us that on the third day of His public ministry Jesus chose to show up at an ordinary wedding in an out of the way town, a place where there is eating, and drinking, and dancing, a place where people are enjoying each other's company, a place where a man and a woman are pledging themselves to each other for life. Jesus' mother is there, His friends are with Him. Jesus' mother comes up to Him and says, "*They have no more wine.*" Now, we don't know. Maybe she expected a miracle from Him. Or maybe, she just wanted Him to run to the Cana liquor store (*after all, He brought His disciples with Him and should chip in His fair share like at a church potluck!*). Or maybe she was telling him the way it is: the wine has run out, and when the wine runs out, the reception will be over ...the "happy moment" is about to be over, and it will soon be time for all of these now happy folks to go back home ... back to life, back to the money problems, back to the health problems, back to whatever season of it is at their homes. The wine is gone. At first Jesus seems to be nonchalant about it; He replies, "*Dear Woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come;*" which paraphrased might mean, "*Oh, mom, this isn't my problem.*" But one can tell from the context He must have said this with a twinkle in His eye, perhaps with a wink and a nod to this woman who reared Him, because apparently His mother knew He was up to something. The words are no sooner out of Jesus' mouth than Mary turns to the servants and says, probably with a knowing smile, "*Do whatever He tells you.*"

By the way, that line ought to be underlined two times: "*Do whatever He tells you.*" Now. In the time we have.

What do you do when your "wine" is running out? Now that's a metaphorical question, of course. Every person in this room lives with a quiet fear that the season will come for you when things will just run out, when the well will go dry, and you will have nothing left to give. Well, when your wine, whatever it may be, threatens to run out, look to Jesus, and *do whatever He tells you*. When the joy of life threatens to run short, look to Jesus, and *do whatever He tells you*. When your resolve for living your life with integrity and honor and sobriety threatens to fail you, look to Jesus, *do whatever He tells you*. When you are running out of patience, when you are running out of money, when you are running out of time, when you are running out of resolve, when you are running out of health or desire or energy ... when you are running out of sermon ideas ... whatever it is, *look to Jesus and do whatever He tells you*. Don't think about it, don't overanalyze it, don't wait for a "better" time to do what He tells you ... the time to do what He tells you is RIGHT NOW. Just do it. Choose your response to whatever season of life you are in. Choose to do what you know is right, what you know is honorable, what you know is good. *Do whatever He tells you*. He can certainly do something about your need.

What is it that Jesus decides to do? He decides to turn ordinary water into wine. Jesus is moved by the ordinary situation of a young, anonymous couple whose happy moment is almost over. It is there, according to John, that Jesus chooses to launch His world redeeming, time-shaking, life changing ministry right there in Nowhere Special with his first miracle ... a miracle that seems almost frivolous, if not downright reckless. According to the text, He gives what amounts to 180 gallons of wine to people who have already been drinking! That's a lot of wine! The master of the banquet said to the groom that most hosts bring out the Boones Farm or Ripple after everyone has been drinking for awhile, but you have saved the best wine for last! What extravagance. Now notice, no one here is healed or fed. No injustice is made right. No sinners are scolded. We are not sure that there are even any life lessons learned. So the reader is tempted to think, "*O Jesus, don't waste your miracle-working power on this. Do something big!*" But more often than not, that is not the way the gospel works. The redemptive, life-saving, life transforming, miracle working power of grace begins right there in the present moment in these ordinary events and gatherings and conversations and celebrations of life with ordinary people in the everyday living of life and God is right there in the thick of it! In fact, the last line of the text tells us it was precisely because of Jesus' almost reckless extravagance here in Cana that the disciples came to put their faith in Him. This was a God they could give their allegiance to. They put their faith in this God-become-man Who cared to enter the present moments of their daily lives. And they also put their faith in Him because they saw what can happen when servants do what Jesus tells them to do. And so they chose to become His servants, doing what He told them to do ... in the time they had, in the season of life they were in.