

Seasons of Change

Ecclesiastics 3: 1-11

Delivered: University Place Christian Church, Champaign, IL

It's a common feeling all of us have experienced before. It's that feeling of disorientation, confusion, and unfamiliarity when we wake up in a bed and in a room that is unfamiliar to us. For some of you, it might be waking up in a tent while lying on the hard ground during a camping trip. Others it might be waking up in an unfamiliar bed in a hotel miles away from home. But for me, it was waking up on a bed with pink sheets, a peeling Justin Timberlake poster on the wall, and an ugly bulldog named Bianca lying next to me with drool running down her face.

It was late summer of 2013 and I found myself as a new resident in Virginia Beach, Virginia. I had just graduated from seminary in Northern California and was beginning a year-long hospital chaplain residency in nearby Portsmouth, Virginia.

Moving to Virginia was a big adjustment for me. For the previous four years, I had lived in Northern California for seminary where I had a friendship and familiarity with my seminary community. However, the time had come for me to step out into the world and do ministry—leaving behind the familiarity of my seminary friends, my community, and even a girlfriend at the time and move across the country to take an opportunity to study chaplaincy in a place where I knew no one.

While my plans for this big adventure seemed exciting at first, it was after one week being in Virginia when I started having second thoughts. I quickly began missing my friends and my community and I also was running out of money to stay at motels while I looked for a permanent place to stay. Knowing that I needed temporary housing, the director of my program arranged for me to stay at the home of his church organist, an older woman in nearby Virginia Beach.

Even though I was glad that I found a temporary place to stay and was welcomed by the generosity of a stranger who invited me into her home for a few weeks, I still recall the awkwardness I felt when she showed me the room where I would be staying in during my stay.

The best way I can describe it is by saying that it was a teenage girl's bedroom from the 1990s as it featured every reference from a teenage girl bedroom in the 1990s; bright pink sheets with a draped canopy, a 1990s Macintosh computer, pictures of her daughter and her friends from high school wearing late 1990s hairstyles, and several peeling pictures of '90s boy band heartthrobs such as Justin Timberlake and the other members of N'Sync that today no one remembers.

What do you do when you find yourself facing a change of seasons in your life that brings you unfamiliarity and makes you uncomfortable?

Our scripture today is all about those changes of seasons.

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes is often not only one of the most recognized chapters in scripture, it can be one of the most difficult books to understand.

When considered in the larger context of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes stands out as an unusual book in relation to mainstream biblical tradition. There is nothing in Ecclesiastes of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. There is no mention of The Great Exodus or Gods special relationship with the Israelites or the Great Promise Land.

And for many centuries, it was assumed Ecclesiastes was written by whom is speaking in the book, a person named Koheleth who claims to be the son of David. While many have assumed this Koheleth character was King Solomon who ruled over Israel in the tenth century BC, biblical scholars today don't believe this is the case. After all, if Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, why doesn't he refer to his reign in the book of Ecclesiastes? And if Kohleth was a son of David (and not that of his brother King Solomon) was is there no record of this mentioning in biblical history?

Much like the many other questions about scripture, the truth is—we simply do not know. But what we do know is this: the author of Ecclesiastes seems to be opening up the book (prior to our chapter three) with having a grim view of life finding it to be pointless and meaningless.

In fact, Chapter One of Ecclesiastes reads:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Even though we don't know who the author may be in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, we can be assured of this, he or she, doesn't view the glass on the table half full. Maybe they don't even view the glass as being full at all. But why does this

author feel this way, why does he feel life to be meaningless and pointless? Is he naturally a pessimistic person? Or is this author experiencing a season in his life of great sorrow and great pain? What season is this author in when we read these first two chapters?

For me, as a recent seminary graduate in 2013 and stepping into my first ministry experience without the comfort of my friends, community, and with little money, it was the unfamiliarity of being in a new surrounding that led me to feel overwhelmed in a new and unfamiliar season in my life. For many of our college students who are starting school next week, it may be being in new surroundings, deal with new roommates, and pressures of harder classes and strict professors that will be seasons of change for them. All of us have experienced changes in the seasons of our lives. From the ending of what we throughout were going to be an everlasting relationship to leaving a job which we spend decades working, to perhaps even seeing our health change, it's these experiences that allow us to see seasons of changes taking place in our lives.

We also see changes in our institutions. One of the ways we are seeing seasons of change is happening right now in the American protestant mainline church. In the 1950s and early 1960s, we saw what the peak of American mainline Protestantism. According to the Pew Research Center, in the United States, 50 percent of families reported attending church weekly through the 1950s and early 1960s. Today, this contrasts with only 35% of Americans who go to church weekly. We are also seeing a change in how people identify themselves religiously in what has been called the rise of the "nones." Nones are those who don't have any religious affiliation. Of "nones", only 17% baby boomers identify as being "nones." While older millennials, those of us born between 1981-1996, 36 percent identify as being "nones."

However, while all of us have been exposed to this data, it's also affects us personally.

One of the things I have been learning about since my arrival here at UniPlace is the history of our church. From its humble beginnings in the early 1900s to stories many of you have shared with me about what it was like to be a member in the 1950s and 1960s when our membership was at the all-time high and two services were offered, while I was not able to experience what UniPlace was like during this time, hearing your stories allows me to experience what this church was like during this pivotal moment in not only American history but in your lives as young people during that time.

However, at the same time, I also have felt your concern about its future as an institution. Many of you who were around in the 1960s, know how drastically how our worship services looked then compared to now. And while many of you understand the cultural trends we are seeing in our country when it comes the decline of the American mainline church, it's still hard to see the painful process taking place in our congregation—a place which is your home.

Your concerns and fears are not shared alone. On average, over 4,000 churches close in the United States each year. And this realistic fear is what almost every mainline protestant church in America is faced with today. Some churches are adjusting to it better than others. Some are merging with other congregations and sharing buildings. Others are doing different styles of worship to attract younger members. However, no matter what American mainline denominational churches are doing, they all are recognizing something which can be hard to admit: the days of packed worship services on Sunday mornings found in the 1950s and 1960s are behind us now. And no matter if churches sing contemporary church music, they hire a young pastor who wears blue jeans and has a guitar strapped on his or her back, or how wide they open their church doors, their pews are never going to be as full as they once were during the height of mainline protestant church in the 1950s and 1960s.

This is because the church, much like our culture and the world we live in, has changed. Millennials are not searching for God and the Christ story the same way their parents and grandparents did every Sunday morning. However, they are still searching for that story in their world and in their lives—even if they describe themselves as a "none." And we as a church, and as American Protestants of the early 21st century need to find different ways to tell that story.

For me and the pink bed sheets and the slobbering bulldog that came with it, it took me a great deal of time not only to find a place to live where I could have my own bed sheets. But it also took the time to lament the end of the season I had while I was in seminary and adjust to a new season in my life as a seminary graduate who was now a resident hospital chaplain.

This season of change is something that all of us deal with in our lives. And perhaps it what brings the author of Ecclesiastes from saying everything is meaningless to seeing that everything in life is a season of change in Chapter 3.

For those of you who are university students, perhaps you are lamenting the end of your life as a high school student and soon will be growing into the life of a university student one than can be scary, but is bound with opportunities of discovery. For those of you who are in your 20s and 30s, maybe you are lamenting the days when you had the physical ability to stay out until 2 AM on a Friday night and now cherishing a new season of your life where you can watch Netflix on a Friday night and go to bed at 9:30 PM and perfectly be okay with it. For those of you in your 50s and 60s, maybe it's lamenting the careers you had and the time you spent raising children and exploring the new season God has for you in retirement while also having the privilege of being able to hand over your grandchildren back to their parents when they start being cranky. And for those who are older, maybe for you, it's looking back on the life you lived, the accomplishments you had, the mistakes you made but learned from, and discerning what will be your legacy that you'll leave behind to those in your life and those around you.

God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, courage to change things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." - Reinhold Niebuhr

In the same way, our church here at UniPlace is in a season of lament. We are lamenting a long and fruitful ministry of packed Sunday services and classrooms filled with Sunday school classrooms. Yet at the same time, we in a new season of re-visioning for our future, one we are still in discernment about, but we know has us called to connect with the University of Illinois students in a way we never have before.

As we find ourselves in discernment in seeing what the next season for UniPlace Christian Church will bring, I encourage you to be engaged in our community dinners and our new and innovative ministries we will be doing this fall and this spring. And I also encourage you to be involved in our outreach to the University of Illinois community. Especially those of you who are older adults here at UniPlace.

Sometimes it's a misconception by many older adults that they don't have much they can offer younger people in terms of their mobility or reference to pop-culture. However, I like to remind people they don't have to be mobile or know who Taylor Swift is currently dating to make a difference in a young person's life.

By attending the community dinners and just conversing with young adults, to attending the different volunteer opportunities (as your mobility allows) we have planned, to even coming with me when we set up a table on volunteer day or being present during the LGBTQ day, don't feel your age will negatively impact the university students we are going to try and reach. Instead, be mindful that millennials are looking for communities which are multi-generational and not just filled with people their age. And know the difference you can make just by being present even if it's in conversation.

Many of the students who will be attending our different events throughout this year are just like you when you were younger; trying to find themselves out while eager to change the world. They want to see the world that seeks social justice and offers equality to all people, just like many of you sought for in the 1960s. But they also need something more. They need your life experience, your wisdom to help guide them during this season of uncertainty in their early lives. They will be dealing with homesickness, family issues, ending of relationships which they thought would last forever, and they will have that over eagerness to change the world yet still trying to figure out exactly how to do that. They will require your mentorship from your experiences so they can help define themselves. Just like I as a young person in ministry will need the experience and mentorship from Pastor Kris and many of you in our congregation who have spent your careers in ministry as I begin my first call in ministry, together we need your guidance, your wisdom, and your experience in our lives. And maybe, we will teach you something during the process too.

My friends, just as our world is changing, so is our lives and so is our church. Yes, no matter how successful our re-visioning process may be, it more than likely will not fill these pews to the way many of you remember. And that is okay if they don't. Because filled church pews are about as appealing as a bedroom decorated bedroom

from the 1990s. Instead, as we take these brave new steps with our re-visioning process, let us remind ourselves that even though God is speaking to people in a different way now, God is still speaking. And through our rich history, tradition, and with all of us working together, we are going to find new ways for people to hear that message. Much like the early church apostles who found ways to deliver Christ's message throughout the lands and much like Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone who found a new way to take that same message throughout the American frontier, we too as a congregation and as a 21st American protestants, have been given a vision by God to deliver a message of unconditional love, reconciliation and hope to a new generation of people who need to hear this message now than ever before. Let us find new ways to deliver this message while also never underestimating the element of surprise we will find along the way.

Bibliography

Feasting on the Word: preaching the Revised common lectionary. By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. N. pag. Print.

The Text This Week - Textweek - Sermon, Sermons, Revised Common Lectionary, Scripture Study and Worship Links <http://www.textweek.com/>