

WPC
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It's About Time
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Rev. 3:7-13

Happy New Year. It's natural to pause and consider the passage of time this week. Ecclesiastes is a book of the Bible that's focused on the significance of time.

The passage we've read from Ecclesiastes 3 is well known. For everything there is a time. What does this text say about time? What are we to make of time and its passage? Ecclesiastes rather somberly stresses that our time doesn't have too much significance. "What gain have the workers from their toil?" asks the writer. What good does human activity amount to?

Ecclesiastes' answer? Not much. God has enabled human beings to mark time, like we do on New Year's. God has "put a sense of past and future into their minds" (Eccles. 3:11). We know that time is passing. An old year has ended, and a new one has begun. We also know, as the text says, that "for everything there is a season." There's a right time for this, a right time for that. And yet, humanity "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11).

In other words, as William Willimon states, “time has significance. Time is experienced as fleeting. And yet it has not been given to us to know the right time. In the face of this rather grim observation about human ignorance of the right time, Ecclesiastes says there isn’t much to do but for us to enjoy ourselves for as long as we live (3:12). We are to find a way to live in the brief time that we have, humbly realizing that though there is a right time for everything, we humans are limited and cannot always know in which time we are presently living.”¹

God doesn’t keep time as we keep time. “Only God knows the final significance of the times of our lives.” That message is not only somber but also humbling. We live the times of our lives, including the changing of the years, upheld by God’s hands.

That means that the time we have been given by God is both a gift and a responsibility. All of us have 24 hours every day to live our lives. What will we do with that time? That’s a good question for each of us to consider as we enter this new year.

Our second Scripture reading was from the last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation, which begins with John sending seven letters to seven churches. This morning, we’ve read the letter to the church in Philadelphia,

¹ Willimon, p. 6.

a little city that served as a Roman outpost. Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities, and the church in Philadelphia was poor and small, but stayed faithful even in the midst of intense pressure from the citizens and the local synagogue.

In v.8, they are told, “I have set before you an open door.’ What is this door that’s been opened wide, that “no one is able to shut”? In early Christian understanding, a “door” was a technical expression for an opportunity to spread the gospel. This church, though small, had a great missionary task to perform. However, they had been met with opposition from the Jewish population of the city, who rejected the claim of Christians that Jesus was the Messiah. A reward is promised to this little church. Because it had faithfully kept Christ’s word of patient endurance, he promises to be with them in the midst of testing and suffering.

This wonderful letter offers us today a strategy to wisely use the time we’ve been given to live out our faith. First, it’s God who opens (and closes) doors, not us. That should help us to relax when we share the good news of the gospel. It’s God’s responsibility to open doors, not mine. It’s not my responsibility to convict and convert people. God is the evangelist, not us. He opens doors, not us. We’re simply witnesses to the marvelous ways God has been at work in our lives.

Second, God knows about our weaknesses - “I know that you have but little power,” he says to the Philadelphians. But God promises to use this Philadelphia church even though they’re fiscally and numerically challenged. God will use these Philadelphia Christians to share their faith with those who don’t know God, to share with them the good news that God loves them.

It’s God who opens doors - he does the convincing, the convicting, and the converting; all we have to do is share the fact that we’ve been loved. Because we’ve experienced the love of God at work in our lives, we can just relax and share the good news. But we can’t share what we don’t have. W. Frank Harrington, former pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church, once said, “Our mission is clear. There is no lack of clarity in what our Lord has asked us, the members of the church, to do. We are to tell the story of Jesus Christ to those who do not believe or who have not heard. But we cannot share with others something that we do not have. We have to believe before we can teach. This may be the central challenge for the church in the United States today.”

In many ways, our church is similar to the Philadelphia church.

Like the church at Philadelphia, our congregation is on the smaller side. I always describe our church as being “small but mighty.” We have a

wonderful demographic – many churches would love to have as many children, youth, and young adults as we have. But on average we're on the small end of the membership scale.

But in spite of challenges we face, I remain firmly convinced that Wallingford Presbyterian Church stands on the brink of incredible opportunities, and that God will continue to use our ordinary lives to do extraordinary things. Our future as a church is bright because of the light of Christ that burns so warmly here. Like the church at Philadelphia, we are a faithful, vibrant, Spirit-filled church able to do extraordinary things with God's help, provided we use the time we've been given wisely.

At our last Session meeting, we reflected back on the past year to see how God has worked in and through this church. Here are just a few highlights:

- Continued building improvements: finished brick work and new roof.
- One year of sharing our building with Korean Glory PC.
- Confirmation class in spring.
- Youth mission trip to Campbell Farm and sr. high youth to Presbyterian Youth Triennium.
- Baptism of whole Swihart family on Easter Sunday.

- Plenty of mission, from the mini Alternative Gift Fair to our Peacemaking Offering (among the highest per capita in the presbytery) to the CROP Walk.
- The work of our wonderful staff (Ray Allen, Gina Topp, Ester Sihite, Michelle Lai, & David Lang).

Of course, along with these and other highlights, we've also experienced our share of challenges. A number of our elderly members are no longer able to join us regularly on Sundays, leaving a sizeable void. Some of our members have moved out of the area. This fact is tougher for a congregation our size to face – we would be well over double our size if everyone who joined since I became pastor was still with us. Ken Duff, a long-time member who passed away several years ago, used to say that WPC has one of the most incredible alumni networks around.

But the good news is that when we look back, we can see that God has opened doors for us this past year, and he will continue to do so in the new year. We've seen that we can make a difference in our neighborhood, our city, our world that's surprisingly disproportionate to our current size.

Let me share with you one hope I have for us as a congregation: I hope and pray that we can all continue to go deeper in our faith. One way to achieve this goal is for all of us, if we're not already doing so, to get involved with a small group this year. Last year during Lent, everyone was

invited to participate in a 4-week small group session called “March to Holy Week.” I was so pleased with the response from this congregation.

A majority of our congregation was involved with small groups that met at various times during the week (morning, noon, and evenings) in the month of March to study selected sections of Richard Foster’s book Celebration of Discipline. This year, the *March to Holy Week* small groups will focus on C.S. Lewis’ book Mere Christianity. Study guides will be made available so that each small group will be studying the same material each week. “March to Holy Week” will culminate with everyone gathering at WPC for worship on Good Friday, in preparation for celebrating Easter three days later.

Why is it so vitally important to deepen our faith? Well, after the message to the church in Philadelphia, the very next message is to the church in Laodicea. Let me read it for you: [Read Rev. 3:14-22]

The church in Laodicea is condemned because they are neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. We’re called not to be lukewarm, not to stagnate in our faith. In fact, the term “Lukewarm Christian” is really an oxymoron, like open secret, or larger half, or seriously funny. We either follow Christ or we don’t.

How are we living our Christian lives? How are we spending the time that God has given us? Are we merely spectators in the stands? Are we involved only on the sidelines? Or are we in the game? Jesus calls us to not be lukewarm but to get in the game.

William Willimon tells the story of a man in a congregation he served who had dangerous open heart surgery. He was told by the doctor he had no more than a 50-50 chance of survival during the surgery. But he did survive. When Willimon visited him afterwards, he said, “You did survive after all! Isn’t that wonderful?”

He said, “No preacher, I didn’t survive. I did more than survive; I was born again. I’m not the same person I have been for the past 50 years. I’ve been given a second chance and I’m gong to be different, better than before.” His post-operative time was for him a time of both judgment and grace.²

As we gather together at the communion table this morning as the family of God, let’s pray that we would all be grateful for the second chance God has given each one of us. Let’s recognize that God has given us the gift of time, and pray that we would each take more time for God during this new year. Let’s give thanks that God will continue to open doors for each

² Willimon, p. 8.

one of us and for us as a congregation, and let's pray that we'll be ready for those wonderful opportunities. Amen.