

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Laugh Therapy 7*

Right Times

June 18, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NIV)

There is a time for everything,

and a season for every activity under the heavens:

² *a time to be born and a time to die,*

a time to plant and a time to uproot,

³ *a time to kill and a time to heal,*

a time to tear down and a time to build,

⁴ *a time to weep and a time to laugh,*

a time to mourn and a time to dance,

⁵ *a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,*

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

⁶ *a time to search and a time to give up,*

a time to keep and a time to throw away,

⁷ *a time to tear and a time to mend,*

a time to be silent and a time to speak,

⁸ *a time to love and a time to hate,*

a time for war and a time for peace.

We're in the book of Ecclesiastes this morning; Ecclesiastes, Chapter Three, if you'd care to turn there with me.

Those eight verses that were read earlier make up certainly the most well-known passage of this book, and I think one of the best-known of the entire Bible.

To everything there is a season. There is a time – a *right* time.

The salesperson, the comedian, the politician of our age would say, "Timing is everything," and while that's not really true, timing does mean a lot in our world, doesn't it? Its not everything, but it is significant.

When and where we do something – when and where we act in a certain way – can make a big difference in result, a difference in how people respond.

If you stand up in the middle of a library and go "Aaaaaagghhh!" everybody around will just stare at you. But if you do the exact same thing on an airplane, everybody will join in.

That has to do with timing, you see?

Four engineers are riding in a car. It stalls.

The electrical engineer says, "Probably bad spark."

The chemical engineer suggests, "No, poor fuel mixture."

The mechanical engineer says, "You're both wrong. It's a timing problem."

The computer engineer has no idea but says, "Hey, maybe if we all get out the car and then get back in, maybe it might start."

Nearly always, there is an inherent rightness or wrongness to the timing of a thing, and the truth is, a lot of the trouble that comes to us comes because what we do or what someone else has done has been done out of time – not at the right time.

A gasoline engine – in order for it to run, or at least to run well – has to be "in time." The valves, pistons,

crank, cam – all those parts in there – have to dance together "in time." If they don't, stuff crashes together.

And most of life works in just that same way: if the timing is off, the dance doesn't work, and feet get stepped on. It is just that sense of right timing that the writer of Ecclesiastes realizes here.

The book of Ecclesiastes is part of the Bible's wisdom literature and tells the story of a person trying to find purpose in life.

As the story unfolds though, it actually gets rather depressing. The word *meaningless*, the idea that there is *nothing new under the sun*, and the return to the theme of *I thought I'd find meaning there, but I was wrong*: those things come up over and over again, describing the difficulty, at times, of life.

But then, at the very end, in the last two verses of Chapter 12, we arrive at, really, the most important part of the work: the resolution of the problem.

The writer basically says, "I have thought deeply of these things and done much investigation, and in the end, here is my conclusion: although life in our world can be difficult and inconsistent, in order for life to make sense and for persons to be whole, this is what we have to do:

- First, *fear God* (which, as you know, means to be in right relationship with Him – to revere Him as the God He is).
- Second, we must *obey God's commands* (value what He says to value, think as He says to think, do as He says to do).
- And then third, we must *trust that God will judge*, in the end, everything that is done.

Once we've done all we know to do, we have to leave both the known and unknown to God to sort out, and we can trust that He will indeed do that.

That is the essence of the work. And frankly, simply embracing that – embracing the overall message of the writer here – is quite critical to making sense of our world. Because no matter what is going on, no matter how meaningless or hopeless or discombobulated things are or seem to be, nothing that is happening at the moment is new, you see?

Whatever our world may be like today, it's been like this before.

People have felt, before, exactly the way you or I feel today.

The guy who wrote this book – King Solomon, we believe – thousands of years ago felt exactly the same way many people feel today. And, since this is Father's Day, let me say, especially men.

Generally speaking, men are the ones who have the drive – and some the obsession – to fix situations and circumstances.

So men, especially – not *exclusively*, but *especially*, ask the questions today:

- Where is the world heading?
- Where is my nation heading?
- Why is there so much injustice?
- Why do things seem so unpredictable?
- Why do evil people prosper?
- Why do holy people suffer?
- Where is God in it all?
- Where can I find truth that I can really trust?

You see, we're tempted to think these thoughts are new, but the writer here felt all of these things in a completely different part of the world, and in a totally different time and culture.

And so, he went looking for the answers, and after considering it all very thoroughly, his conclusion was that, since there are some things that we'll never totally understand in our present time, the only real way forward is to:

- 1) fear God,
- 2) obey His commands, and,
- 3) trust judgment to Him.

That is the overall message of Ecclesiastes in making sense of our world: a message that the wise among us could learn from if we will.

But, within this larger work, there is something more. There's this section here in chapter 3, specifically about *timing*, or as it's translated in places: *seasons*.

Other than at the very end of the book, this is one of the only places in here that seems to be hopeful or positive, because it declares that even as confusing and unjust and disordered as the world seems to be, in truth, there *is an order* to even that which seems to be chaos to us.

There is a *time*; there is a *season*; there is a *fitness* and *sensibility* to the way God has made the world that, in spite of the fall, is still operating and effective.

Looking out over our broken world, we're tempted at times to think that there is no order, that chaos has overtaken, that evil has triumphed, and that there is no reason for anything pleasant anymore – no reason for pleasant thoughts, pleasant hopes, pleasant feelings.

But, as scripture assures us, that is just not the case.

Even as the writer here questions and doubts and wonders as he looks out over his world, he can't help but conclude that, as nutty as the world so often seems, God still enforces boundaries on the bad and the broken.

God is in control of the times and the seasons that come.

Yes, people do die here, but people are also being born. The beauty of life goes on.

Yes, plants are harvested here, but plants are also being sown.

Yes, people succumb to disease here, but people are also being healed.

Yes, there is mourning, but there is also dancing and rejoicing.

And he goes on and on, naming and admitting the presence of the bad, but also the good, which makes this declaration of order and times and seasons a happy encouragement within the happy encouragement of the greater book.

The fact is, it's a great relief, isn't it, to come to see that there is order to our world, and to know that God is in charge of it. So much of our culture is scared to death and places all the responsibility on us to bring order to our world.

And we do have work to do, certainly.

But this world belongs to God, and He has not just washed His hands of it and of us. *He is powerfully engaged in our present and our future.*

So, beyond just seeing *that* truth as words on a page, how can we experience it for ourselves?

How can we know, even today, the peace in this that so much of our world is desperately trying to find?

Again, Solomon tells us:

- 1) We fear God; we give Him the honor and glory He's due.
- 2) We obey His commands; we take His word seriously and follow it with our lives.
- 3) And, after we've done these, we choose to trust Him for what's to come, because He is still the God of order, the God of time, and the God of the seasons for both the happy and the sad of life.

We see this in the overall message of these eight verses here.

And yet, within these eight verses, there is one more assertion that speaks even more precise relief and peace to wondering and conflicted souls: the declaration (v.4) that while there may well be seasons for tears, there are also seasons for laughter.

Yes, there are times to weep, but there are also times – there are right times – to laugh.

In fact (not to make too big a deal of this), I tend to think that this whole text here is presented in such a way that suggests where God wants us to land even as we read it.

Of the 14 couplets here (vv. 2-8), at least nine of them, the majority, are arranged in what we'd tend to think of as a positive order.

Kill and then heal.

Tear down and then build up.

Scatter, then gather.

Plant, then harvest.

War and then peace.

And verse four: a time to weep and then a time to *laugh*.

It's God's order of things that is communicated here:

winter before spring,

grief before joy,

death before resurrection.

Weeping? Perhaps, yes. But then? Then comes laughter.

There yet remains a time for laughter.

Though the days may be difficult in the moment, for those who love and trust Christ there will come, we can be absolutely sure, there will come a time to laugh.

Did you know that the Greek Orthodox Church has a centuries old tradition of gathering together on the Monday after Easter to tell jokes to each other?

It's true.

You see, jokes in sermons are not just the superfluous fluff that some think they are. They have a purpose.

The orthodox do this because it is one way to celebrate the greatest prank ever played: God raising Jesus from the death that the devil surely thought was His end.

To commemorate and celebrate God's magnificent "last word," they laugh together as an act of defiance against evil.

You see, laughter, at its holiest and best, is a declaration of the certainty of our sure, future hope. Laughter is the human affirmation that God will most certainly win after all.

In his book, *Theology of Play*, Jürgen Moltmann talks about this sort of holy laughter as part of the work of liberation.

It's the reason for the whole genre of African American spirituals: the laughter of slaves who know their deliverance is coming – if not in this life, then certainly in the next.

It's because, you see, when we know how things end for us, we're set free to laugh.

That's why the deepest and best laughter is Easter laughter – Resurrection laughter. It is the declaration that, in reality, we are free.

Someone wrote, "Easter laughter oxygenates the soul through and through."

It's true, and you know, all of this – this whole idea of the significance and beauty of Easter laughter – is actually prefigured in Psalm 126.

The psalmist writes, "*When the captives returned to Zion their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with songs of joy.*"

They were, the Psalmist says, "*like those who dreamed.*"

You see, they could hardly believe it. Their deliverance had come, and so their laughter echoed through the centuries. Generation after generation, God's delivered people kept singing the same song as they made their annual pilgrimage to the temple.

A song of redemption, of good prevailing over evil and right over wrong.

It's a song of laughter.

It's a song that finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

It's a song His people sing today.

When we sing our *hallelujahs* on Easter Sunday...

When we, like the Orthodox, tell our jokes on Easter Monday and anytime following...

As we sing songs of praise and thanksgiving every Lord's Day.

As we choose to laugh and sing even while difficulties arise in our lives...

We are joining with those in history who knew the depths of brokenness and sorrow, but yet affirmed that God is the deliverer, *and* that God always has the last laugh.

God always has the last laugh. And even today, He invites us to laugh with Him.

E. Stanley Jones writes, "Certainly there is a place for grief, but I never grieve over the tragedies of life for long – because we know how things turn out in the end."

We know that God, and not evil, is in charge of life here.

In fact, in the end, the joke is on the evil, because we in Christ: we are raised with Him. We in Christ, though we die, yet shall we live.

We in Jesus, we are Easter people, and so we are free.

We in Jesus, we have the assurance that, no matter what may be happening in our lives at the moment, this present season will eventually pass and seasons of healing and mending and harvest and birth – and even laughter – will come.

Even if, right now, you see no humor on the horizon, if you are in Christ, you can rest assured that it will return, because it's part of God's created order brought to fullness in resurrection.

That is the assurance we find here in Solomon: even though the world around, or maybe just our own, private world, seems to have flipped its lid, still, we can laugh.

If we'll fear God, and

if we'll obey His commands, and

if we'll trust judgment to Him, and

if we set ourselves firmly in Christ,

then the time is right – the time is always right – to laugh.

Has something stolen your laughter today?

What is it?

What pressure?

What circumstance?

What threat?

What is it that seems stronger than God in your today or tomorrow?

Please, whatever it is, though it may be here for a season, and no doubt the pain it causes is real, rest assured that its time – its season – will end, and the season of joy and peace and laughter will not only come, it will overcome.

As Solomon did – as Jesus did, and as His Spirit empowers us to do – would you choose to look to that time, and take confidence and courage?

Now, if you don't know Jesus, you need to receive Him – that's the first thing. He is the path to redemption and resurrection. He is the way to peace.

But all in Christ today: we are free! And so, we are free to live in the joy of that reality.

Even today – today is the season – the right time for laughter, because Jesus has overcome.

Closing Prayer:

Father, help us to take confidence and assurance in our right relationship with You, in obeying Your commands, and in trusting judgment to You. Help us to know that You are still the God of order, the God of time, the God of the seasons of life.

Help us to know that, even though we'll have trouble in this world, Jesus has overcome. And may that reality be our true and enduring joy. Amen.

Closing Song: *Faith Is the Victory*, vv. 1, 2, 4

Benediction:

To all who will follow Jesus, God the Father has already given the sure and confident victory over eternal death. May we also now receive, from Him, that same sure and confident victory in our spirits over the hardships of life *here and now and every day* until we see Him face to face.

May He let us know, with certainty, that the reason for joy (our reason for laughter) has come, and that the season of laughter (the time to laugh) is here.