

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

What Time is It?

Sermon Reflection Notes

We heard Pastor Mary Beth preach several months ago about Ecclesiastes 3, how there is a season for everything. Ecclesiastes 3 is a beautiful list of important moments in life (a time to be born, a time to die, a time to love, a time hate, etc.) and the list is true. There is a time for everything; but those times are not up to us. They are often thrust upon us whether we are ready for them or not. In the scriptures we've heard in the past few weeks, Judah was in a time of destruction. It was in a time of dying, mourning, lamenting, grieving. The nation was experiencing the stages of grief during exile: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Grief is never linear; the stages don't go in order, and we can't check them off like a to-do list. Just last week, we heard a passage from Jeremiah that told the Jewish people to settle in, get comfortable because they would be there a while. They were to plant gardens and raise families and set up shops, and even pray for the welfare of Babylon (their oppressors) because this was reality now.

This week, Jeremiah lights a candle of hope in the midst of the darkness of exile. He tells of a different time coming, saying there was a time for the war and breaking down and destroying, but that a time for sowing will arrive. Hope exists, even in exile.

To hope in the midst of grief takes a great deal of courage. Many experience guilt in thinking about the future because it feels like abandoning the past. Rebuilding can seem like abandoning what was. And that is where hope comes in. Hope is forged in the crucible of suffering. Hope holds the conviction that God is not done.

Christopher Lasch makes a distinction between hope and optimism: "Hope doesn't demand progress; it demands justice—a conviction that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope appears absurd to those who lack it. We can see why hope serves us better than optimism. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst; the worst is what the hopeful are prepared for. A blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through, even when they don't." Hope doesn't wipe away the pain and grief. It allows us to find light in the darkness because we know God is not done. God will rebuild and God will watch over.

Jeremiah says God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This new covenant does not replace the old one. The laws of Moses and the promises to Abraham still exist. What is new about this covenant is that it no longer lives on scrolls or stone tablets; it lives in the people of Judah and it lives in us. God is going to write this law of love on the hearts of God's people and they will carry God's message and promise and relationship with them wherever they go.

For the people of Israel, just like us, it was hard to follow all the rules. What they needed, what we need, is a new way of living, something rooted in relationship. We need to develop muscle memory, a way to offer practices, habits, and kinship with the mind and heart of God so we don't need to check the rules, but instead embody God's way.

Whatever time it is in our lives, whether we are facing grief or delight, rubble or rebuilding, God is still at work. God is doing new things. God is not done with you, or me, or any of us yet.

Scripture

Jeremiah 31:27-34 (NRSVUE)

²⁷ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. ²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

³⁰ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Discussion Questions

1. The idea that there is a time for everything in life is a familiar one. Why is it important to recognize and name what time we are in? What are some common, perhaps even universal 'times of life?'
2. Pastor Ron pointed out that while there is a time for everything, those times are not up to us. We don't get to decide when we are ready for something. The times are thrust upon us whether we are ready or not. Why is it important to understand that we don't get to choose what time we are in and when it happens? How does that understanding help us?
3. Pastor Ron told a story about his cholesterol levels at 25 and his reaction in the immediate aftermath. Then he talked about following rules and new ways of living. What was the point he was making?
4. "Hope is forged in the crucible of suffering." What does this mean to you?

5. *"Hope doesn't demand progress; it demands justice—a conviction that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope appears absurd to those who lack it. We can see why hope serves us better than optimism. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst; the worst is what the hopeful are prepared for. A blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through, even when they don't."* There's a lot to think about and talk about with this quote. Where would you like to start?

Closing Prayer

Promise Making God, when we find ourselves mired in the exile of our fear, our anxiety, our grief – when we find ourselves in the exile of oppression, broken relationships and suffering – your voice comes whispering to us once more through the voice of the ancient prophet. You show up in the valley of the shadow of death. You speak your covenant promise that you are with us with forgiveness, with mercy, and with grace. You write those promises on our hearts. And we are grateful. When we thought all was lost, we are grateful to find that we are not alone. You hold our hand and lead us out of the darkness toward your light. Help us to trust the promises – that whatever befalls us, we are safe in your loving arms. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who teaches us to trust. Amen.

"Heart of my own heart, whatever befall. Still be my vision, oh ruler of all."