

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
When Festivals Don't Feel Like They Should
March 29, 2020
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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; John 12:27-36

We started today's readings with a poem from Ecclesiastes. The section Pastor John read has a few verses of Hebrew poetry that many of us have heard before about all things having a season. Hebrew poetry, like all poetry, has its own rules that when you know them you are able to see the deeper meaning in these few lines. These rules help clue readers into rhythms that are intended to draw attention to details and help us truly understand the text. They help create the image the writer wants the reader to draw in their mind's eye. Since many of us are not native Hebrew speakers the clues in these rules may slip past us and we might not make the right picture when we hear these verses, so I want us to look a little closer at a few things.

In the verses, we can all hear the pairs, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. If you were looking at the poem these pairs would be emphasized even more because they are all given their own line. A time to kill and a time to heal, next line, a time to break down and a time to build up. The writer wants us to see the structure forming so we can draw lines of meaning between these things.

Another rule that the writer follows is to make comparisons. The pairs are Birth and death. Planting and harvesting. These are opposites which creates a continuum. If these things were set on a line one would be on the far right and one would be on the far left. So we can hear the writer telling us that there is literally a time for EVERY thing under the sun from one end of the line to the other. There is a time for both ends and everything in between. If the writer is drawing a straight line there should be some designation as to which end is which. Which way the writer wants us to travel along this line between these things. From the good end to the bad or vice versa for example. In traditional Hebrew poetry if the writer wants you to prefer one thing and designate it as good over the other they will put the "better" option second so it is fresher in your mind. But our verses today start with a time to be born and a time to die. The second thing mentioned is death, which does not seem like the more desirable of the pair. Surely the writer is not saying death is better than birth. Anyone who has experienced both things will choose birth over death.

So maybe this writer has a reason to break the traditional rule. Poets sometimes do break rules to draw extra attention to the preference they are trying to make. They break the rule to throw off an audience and make us pay attention to the reality they want us to see clearly. So maybe this writer is flipping the pattern on purpose. If that is the case we would expect all the preferred items to be first and the lesser preference to be second. Since birth comes first in its pair we assume everything that comes first should be the writer's preferred state. This works for some of the pairs, plant, seek, and keep all come first. However, not everything we would think of as preferred comes first. Kill comes first too. Break down, weep, and mourn all come first in their pairs.

There is no seeable pattern to set up the preference to which side of the spectrum we should be going towards. By presenting these pairs in a random order the writer takes the two ends of the line spectrum that we thought we were on and connects them to make a circle. We are not on a line spectrum moving towards or away from good or bad things. We are on the line of a circle with no beginning no end no hierarchy. This randomness of the pairs tells us that the writer is not making a moral judgement on these things at all. There is no preference. What is being said is that this is simply the reality of human experience. Some things happen that are preferred and some things happen that are not.

This equalizing of emotion reminded me of a poster that was on the wall of my AP psych class in high school. The poster was titled "Wheel of Emotion" it had three concentric circles with spokes cutting through the circles. In

the very center were the six basic emotions. Sad, fear, disgust, happy, anger, and surprise. If you have seen the movie inside out 5 of these were turned into characters and they controlled each person's brain. Disney Pixar got that straight from psych 101. But we all know emotions get more complicated than just these six. The next circle in the poster breaks each basic emotion into 4-6 more specific emotions. Happy becomes optimistic, peaceful, or interested. Anger becomes hurt, distant, or hateful. Sad becomes guilty, depressed, or bored. Then the third circle breaks them down even more. Guilty is ashamed or remorseful. Optimistic becomes inspired or open. Hateful is violated or resentful. And we suddenly go from 6 emotions to 72. 72 very specific emotions. Remorseful to indifferent, all in the sad spoke. Sarcastic to embarrassed, all in the anger spoke. Inspired to liberated, all in the happy spoke. These verses reminded me of the poster because the wheel layout makes it so that no emotion is better than another. They all sit together like king Arthur's knights of the round table. No one is at the head and no one is opposite of the other. Not even happy and sad are opposite, they are just different seasons in a person's life. This is what the wheel of emotion conveys and what the writer of Ecclesiastes is telling us in the structure of the poem. There is no wrong emotion, or bad emotion. They are all equal, and they all have their season to be felt. No season is better or worse than the other. The reality this writer wants us to see is Happiness is not better than sadness. Surprise is not better than disgust. Weeping and laughing are equal in their importance. Sure we may want to be in seasons of laughter more than weeping but if all we ever do is laugh it's going to be unhealthy for us. We need to cry when the season to cry comes, not rush back to laughter, and ignore the new season.

The writer wants us to EXPERIENCE these seasons, and I say that with open arms because I mean experience our emotions. Not just to be able to say them out loud but to notice what is happening in our hearts and minds and body when we feel. What does anger do to a body? My heart races, my vision goes blurry, I can't formulate the sentences I want to and I can't process incoming information very well. What does surprise do to a body? Well a lot of the same things anger does which is why it is so important to feel and understand what we are feeling when we are in the season of an emotion so we can better decipher if this is anger or surprise. We have all probably seen videos where someone jumps out to scare someone else. How many times does a person get punched when someone is feeling surprised? Punching is normally an anger response but sometimes it comes out as a surprise response. So emotions can feel like other emotions. Taking time to sit in the season with the emotion helps us know ourselves better and helps us process through what we are actually feeling at the core emotion.

Grief is an emotion that pretends to be all these other emotions. When we grieve, we can act angry, happy, sad, disgusted. That is why it can be so hard to realize we are grieving. That is why it can take so long to process grief, because a lot of the time we literally have no idea what root emotion is causing our behavior to fluctuate too much. Emotions are complicated, but they deserve their season.

I find a lot of comfort in thinking about emotions being in seasons. As someone who has spent her whole life in Michigan I love our changing seasons. I tend to love them more around this time of year because I do have a preference and my favorite season is coming soon. It gets harder to like the changing seasons in September as I prepare for a season of winter. But even in winter I try to experience what I can of it. I take the time to find the good things. The way snow sticks to trees after a wet snow fall. Or the way icicles reflect the light after a deep freeze, and who can complain about a snow day. Even my least favorite season has its benefits.

I also spend a fair amount of time acknowledging the bad things too. Scrapping a car is awful. Bundling up to go trick or treating and covering my whole costume is infuriating. There are things I hate about winter but they deserve to be experienced because they are all part of the season. If I tried to go through winter happy and finding the silver lining, I would be exhausted because I would be fighting my truth. It would get harder and harder to function because I would be spending all my energy finding something positive to say. It's okay to just feel miserable. Every season has it's benefits and its disadvantages. I have to stay open to both to really live in that season.

Our emotions are valuable tools for understanding our health. Physical, mental, and spiritual. If we fight them and try to "be fine" the whole time we aren't honoring the season. I spent this last week calling people on my phone

to see how they were. Not a single person said “Good. How are you?” They all gave me a real answer! They knew I didn’t expect them to be good so they gave me the truth. Most of them were “good” but we got to talk about the ups and downs and experience this season more fully because we allowed each other to truly experience it.

These past few weeks have sent me around that wheel of emotion multiple times. Jumping from hope to despair, from disgust to pride, from avoidance to helplessness. Should I find more silver linings? Can I complain about my time at home when my friends have three year olds destroying their homes daily? Is it okay to feel happy that no one in my inner circle is sick yet? All this whirling around me until I finally just asked God to tell me how I should feel. The answer I got was “yes.” Yes you should feel hopeful and yes you should feel despair. Whatever you are feeling is right. It is the exact right feeling to be having for the time we are living in. It is okay to be happy all your plans were cancelled. It is okay to feel angry that people aren’t taking this more seriously. It is okay to be relieved the family vacation was cancelled. It is okay to be proud of your neighbors. It is okay to be distressed you won’t see your favorite teacher again. It is okay to feel bored. Every emotion is worth feeling for its season.

There is one other element of this poem I want us to look at. I think it really drives home why it is so important to honor what you are feeling in the season it arises. The randomized structure of this poem also shows us that we do not know what season is coming next. We are not heading towards something worse and we aren’t heading towards something better. What we are heading towards is something different. We simply do not know what season is ahead of us. There is no pattern. This makes it doubly important to feel what we are feeling now because what we have now is just for now. Emotions get dangerous when they aren’t given their season. When we try to skip past them or spin the wheel for another option. When we force ourselves into another season the original emotion is left to fester in the corners of our being.

But when we give each emotion it’s rightful time there is a promise in these scriptures that the season will change. Even grief will change and become something different. It may always be with you in some form but it will change. We need to feel what we feel now because this may be the only time we feel this way. It may be the only time to learn what this feels like, to learn what the benefits of this season are and to learn what the downsides too. Whatever is coming next will be its own season.

Jesus understood this on his ride into Jerusalem. Many people point out that Jesus does not seem particularly happy during this festival. There is no grand speech to address the adoring crowd or actions that suggest his enjoyment. In fact, we hear very little about Jesus’ feelings about the festival. He simply is not feeling joyful and does not fake it for the crowd. He lets them be joyful, he isn’t a downer on their parade, but he doesn’t put on an act for them either. I’ll bet that was very comforting to the person who was also not feeling joyful at the parade either.

Sometimes holidays just don’t feel like they should. I can almost guarantee this Easter is not going to feel different. But just because this season is going to be different doesn’t mean it is bad. For your introverted friend this may be their favorite Easter of all time. It may become yours because the image of being resurrected from a tomb and coming out alive will hit just a little closer to home this year. It may also be awful. But whatever it ends up being, feel it and be honest about it, because it is only just for a season. When we are honest about our emotions people will feel more comfortable in their own emotional experience around us. Our openness and honesty frees others from the shame of what our world calls “bad” emotions. And we can offer to others the same promise scripture offers us, that this is just for a season.