

Being Green
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection:

“Christians are a people on a pilgrimage through profane time made holy by the eternal cycle of sacred time.”
John Westerhoff III

Hebrew Scripture: *Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

For everything there is a season,
And a time for every matter under heaven.
A time to be born and a time to die
A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted
A time to kill and a time to heal
A time to break down and a time to build up
A time to weep and a time to laugh
A time to mourn and a time to dance
A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together
A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing
A time to seek and a time to lose
A time to keep and a time to cast away
A time to rend and a time to sew
A time to keep silence and a time to speak
A time to love and a time to hate
A time for war and a time for peace

Epistle Reading: *I Thessalonians 5: 16-25*

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil. ²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. ²⁵Beloved, pray for us.

Meditation

Being Green

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

Time for work. Time for vacation. Time to wake up. Time for a committee meeting. “For everything there is a season,” says the Teacher. Even if we thought the time for this text was a funeral or a in a playlist that includes The Birds, we understand that. We live in a by-

appointment world—a system which allows everyone is present and prepared for whatever task might be at hand.

On the other hand, we might find ourselves wondering, when are the times for all the things that Ecclesiastes enumerates—the times for *every* purpose under heaven. I'd be willing to bet that even the most detailed planners among us, few if any of us have appointments like: Tuesday, 10 am – a time for love, or Friday at 2 pm –crying time again. We may think we don't need appointments for things like laughing and crying—laughter is for birthdays, weeping is for funerals, we embrace and dance at weddings and so on. These events may not yet be on our calendars right now, but we recognize their appointed times.

We look to the liturgical calendar for the same guidelines so we don't miss all the purposes under heaven. God is penciled in to become human during Advent and Christmastide, to share our suffering in Lent and to overcome death on Easter.

Whichever calendar we are looking at, we can't help but see that we live most of our time in-between—in between weddings and anniversaries, births, birthdays and deaths; in between ailing and healing, a wedding service and creating a marriage; in between bearing a child and becoming family—in between yesterday and tomorrow.

Curiously enough, the church has a name and a symbol for that in-between time—it's known as "ordinary time." Ordinary time is traditionally marked by green paraments, and if I were robed today, my stole would be green. As you know, I began attending church as an adult. Most Christian symbols had little meaning for me. I learned by observing. One of the first things I learned was that when the paraments were green, nothing special was going to happen—no grand chorales, no dramatic services of light and darkness, no extra candles or flowers banking the chancel. It was just ordinary, regular, usual or perhaps, as ordinary has often come to mean, boring.

That makes us uncomfortable. We don't want to live our lives in church or out, mostly in boring times, or ones that are below standard, whatever that might mean, or without purpose, or just waiting for the next thing. It's that feeling that leaves us even more uncomfortable when Ecclesiastes writes, "Vanity, all is vanity," as though none of it means anything—the appointments, the special times or the times in between.

In order to gain perspective, both on our lives and God's role in them, we'd do well to consider again what Ecclesiastes wrote: "There is a time for every purpose under heaven." He did not write: "For every moment, there is an appointed purpose." This is not simply a semantic distinction, but one that is embedded in the Hebrew and can easily be lost for us in translation.

There is a Hebrew word that means "appointed time" but the one used in this text is not it. The word in this text is more like our word "moment"—a duration of time. Rather than offer us a fatalistic interpretation of the seasons and times of life, Ecclesiastes attempts to reassure us and remind us that God gives us time—indeed has provided all our days that we might experience the fullness of life. Ecclesiastes wasn't encouraging us to whip out our calendars and make sure they are full; he was telling us they are already full with the promises of God.

We might be inclined to say that's not terribly helpful. Think how receptive we would be if we could be prepared. We're responsible. We would do our homework. We would read the signs. We would never discount it when someone said "I love you," and we'd always know when someone needed us. "If only we knew", we groan. If God just gave us a calendar like the

one we try to find in Ecclesiastes' words, our lives would be more full. God's word would be fulfilled sooner.

Of course, we have calendars, and we have all known Christmases when *Joy to the World* passed us by; when Easter didn't bring us new life or when communion was just bread and grape juice; when despite all our preparations, we weren't ready or—we were so busy getting ready for the wrong thing that we missed the real thing. Having a day set aside isn't always the answer.

We make a mistake if we read Ecclesiastes' words and think he is telling us there is a cosmic calendar. He is reminding us of a divine promise—the promise that God's will will be done, and assurance that time is our gift and God is present in every moment, not just in the ones we have assigned to look for that presence. If, from that promise comes hope, there should also come mystery—a sense of mystery and wonder that causes us to look deeply into each moment to discern God's presence.

Every one of us can remember moments between a birth and a birthday when we have been struck with wonder at the miracle of life; the moments between Christmases, when we have encountered “God with us” sitting in the pew next to us, or beside a hospital bed, in a stranger's welcoming smile, or even found the gift of our own lives in someone else's words. Between one Good Friday and the next, there is a moment when we see the face of Christ's suffering in the face of the world, and there are moments that never fall on an Easter day, when we know that despite the worst humans can do, God's purposes will overcome human brokenness.

In each of those moments, God has found us unprepared—which is, if the truth be told, how God always finds us. But God does indeed find us in the ordinary, in-between times of our lives—between feasts and fasts, between celebrations and funerals. Ordinary time is the space where we live out the faith we proclaim week after week, year after year, meal after meal, among all the formal celebrations and witnessing of our lives. It is in the cycles of worship and praise, prayer and service that we are reminded—it is not our preparation that brought Christ into the world, it is not through our careful calendar keeping that God finds us at all, but it is God's actions, will and work that we always be found and never be lost.

The green paraments of ordinary time call us to be green in the ordinary days of our lives. It's not easy being green like the shoot of a tender new plant. We will be chilled in the rain, and vulnerable without the tough bark of our experience. It's not easy being green, swaying in the wind of uncertainty. It's not easy being green, not folded stiffly in the direction of where the light has shone before, but being still flexible enough to turn toward the light, wherever it shines each new day.

It's not easy being green, yet Ecclesiastes and our faith lead us to expect it is worth the effort. Being green gives us the opportunity to experience what God is doing today. Being green means giving up the security of predictable expectation for the possibilities of God's unanticipated dream for us. Being green means living fully and well in each moment, that indeed, we might discover God's presence and purpose in all of our days, not just the few we set aside for special attention. Being green means accepting the promise that God is with us each and every day.

Let us pray: God of our life: This is the day you have made. Help us to rejoice and be glad in it. Let us find in the day all the things for which you have made us human, laughing and crying, loving and learning, speaking and keeping silent, praying and serving. Lord of our life: This is the day you have made. In whatever ways you choose to reveal yourself, may our eyes, be open, may our hearts be welcoming and may our spirits be receptive, so that we might once again, discover that all our days with you are extraordinary. Amen.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Loving God: Even in the midst of summer, we can come to you a tired people. We have so many claims on our time; so many obligations overwhelm us. In the rush, it is people who get lost—our friends and family members, even ourselves.

We struggle to nurture of all our relationships. We try to strike a balance between independence and intimacy. We value our freedom of choice, yet are frustrated when those we love make different decisions than we would make for them. We want to be closer to our friends, our families and our church, but we get scared when we realize that the price of closeness is risk and vulnerability. Give us the courage to be open. Let us dare to be known that we might also know.

Not only in our homes do we struggle, Lord, but in our hospitals and laboratories, in our schools, in our businesses and work places, and in the halls of government, we make choices every day. Choices about how we spend our money, about how we treat our fellow workers and our customers, about what we teach our children, about how we care for our environment. In this information age, we find it easy to hide the impact of our decisions on people behind the numbers in our reports. We do not ask that you make the difficult decisions for us. We ask for your presence and guidance as we make them, seeking always to do your will.

We have come to this place seeking your support. Refresh us with your Spirit Lord. Ease our discouragement. Invigorate us in our fatigue. Help us to open ourselves to you, not just in this hour but in every hour. Guide our choices. Comfort us in every circumstance.

As, in silence, we lift up the decisions that confront us now, we pray that we discover new rhythms of living, that our lives might once again be joyous and graceful.

SILENCE

Hear our prayer Lord, our words and the ones your son taught us to pray when together
.... Our Father

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**