

## **“Signs of a New Day”**

*A sermon preached on Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 by Emily Hull McGee  
on December 30, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

If you’ve been reading or listening or engaging with any form of media these last few days, you may have felt inundated with reviews or previews. I’m talking about our cultural tendencies to spend the last days of each year simultaneously in retrospection and prediction: creating ‘best of’ lists of movies, books, gadgets, and people from the year and previewing what items and experiences are yet to come; assessing what has been and looking forward to what will be. The Christmas ham leftovers are still languishing in our refrigerators, and glitter from bows and cards and wrapping paper is still popping up everywhere... but our world and the calendar urges us on to consider this season, this time and make sense of it all.

We do this collectively, of course, but also individually, right?

Perhaps you have a pattern of using the closing days of December to look back and take stock of all that has transpired this year. That may mean doing a mental run-down of 2018’s highs and lows: great successes or challenges in your work, memorable trips or experiences that meant much to you, moments that crackled with laughter or energy or hope or pain. As you review, you find yourself noticing patterns and subtle shifts that have transpired as days passed, assessing where you fell short or when you thrived, acknowledging the strains of this cultural and political moment on your health, your friendships, your family, our common life together. Retrospectively, you might realize that things make more sense in the

rearview mirror or that things feel just as messy or maddening now as they did as the days unfolded.

Or perhaps you use these in-between days to look forward and imagine the shape of the year to come. You might call them resolutions or declarations, or maybe they're just ideas or actions you'd like to pursue this year, however big or small. This could be the year to finally work on that bucket list, to turn the page from where you were to where you're going. 2019 might be the year you finally get organized or clean out the basement, make those photo albums or lose the weight, quit smoking or slow your drinking, get out of debt or start that business, have the hard conversation or explore an emerging conviction, go back to school or take up a new hobby, read a book a week or put down your phone, join the choir or start some new Sabbath practices, run the marathon or run for office, fix the relationship or take the trip of a lifetime — all in the spirit of a new season, new priorities, new possibilities, new you.

For some of us, these days sandwiched between Christmas and New Year's may simply hold exhaustion — emotionally wrung-out from time with family or physically spent from working overtime throughout the holidays. Others of us feel heightened anxiety born out of disconnection from our regular routines, or profound grief over a loss that knocks the wind out of you this time of year, or a touch of depression that creeps in as the bustle and blessings of the season fade and return to their spot in the attic until next year. The thought of reviewing or resolving right now may be too much to bear.

*But for everything there is a season and a time: a time to pour out, and a time to replenish; a time to reflect, and a time to imagine.*

## II.

The writer of Ecclesiastes — Qohelet, he's called — understood this pattern of looking at the seasons of life and trying to make sense of them. “For everything there is a season,” the writer says, “and a time for every matter under heaven.” Poetic and sweeping yet grounded and honest, the beloved language that unfolds in the words to come speaks to the times of the human life and experience. Qohelet names fourteen opposites — parallels that stand in tension with one another. They begin with the most consummate of differences: “a time to born, and a time to die.” What follows, then, are observations on a range of human behavior: personal choice, affection, speech, patterns.<sup>1</sup> He doesn't try and resolve the tension between the seasons, but rather simply names them and observes them, noting the order that emerges to life and setting up the reader for hope and not despair. For “God has made everything suitable for its time,” Qohelet says in review, “God has put a sense of past and future into their minds.” Or in some translations: “Got has set eternity in their hearts.”

It's no accident that the lectionary invites a reading of this passage each year at the turn of the year. For these are often the days we try and make sense of the seasons and the times in which we find ourselves, looking to signs and indicators to guide us along the way. And what better time than Christmas in the bleak midwinter, what better season than in the shadow of stable to do this work! Writer Anne Rice (not to be confused with our own

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, “Ecclesiastes 3:1-13,” *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year C*, p55-56.

Anne Rais!) noted this genius of timing, saying, “Was it a slick move by the early church authorities,” she asks, “to celebrate the birth of Christ in the middle of winter, or was it perhaps an accidental stroke of genius that connected the powerful story of Christ’s birth to the time of year when poverty and want are felt most keenly, as Dickens put it, and when people struggle so valiantly to keep the faith that times will be better, that suffering, deprivation, cold, will inevitably come to an end?”<sup>2</sup> *For everything there is a season,*’ Qohelet says, *“and a time for every matter under heaven!”* There is no doubt: this is precisely the season for the Christ to be born.

In these days after Christmas, some of you have already hauled your trees out to the curb and exhaled, and others of you are still dancing to Bing Crosby or Mariah Carey in your kitchens — hanging on to this season as long as you can. Some of you are ready for a clean slate, a new year, a fresh start, and others of you grieve letting go of what has unfolded this year. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this mindset, and it was to those who find themselves knowingly or unknowingly buying into it that he wrote: “At the beginning of a new year, many people have nothing better to do than to make a list of bad deeds and resolve from now on — how many such ‘from-now-ons’ have there already been! — to begin with better intentions... they believe that a good intention already means a new beginning; they believe that on their own, they can make a new start whenever they want... [But] where people are on their own and live by their own devices, there is only the old, the past. Only where God is can there be a new beginning.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Rice, “Christmas Confession,” *Goodness and Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, p205-206.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger*, p80.

And here, my friends, is the good news — good news of this Christmas season, good news of a New Year's season, good news of every season. For in Jesus, God has come to be with us always. In Jesus, God came to dwell with humanity yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In life and death, planting and pruning, mourning and dancing, keeping and throwing away — all will be held within God-made-flesh because they are all seasons of this life that he came to live with us: no matter if we're exhausted or anxious, worn down or depressed, reflective or resolved. For the One who came in the fullness of time came for all our times. This is why the good news of Christmas cannot be contained in a creche, or wrapped up with all the decorations to be stored for the year. For this good news — the signs of God's new day emerging all around us — is good news no matter the season of our personal or shared experience.

For those in a season of birthing, we look with hope to God's best gift — a poor, vulnerable, wondrous baby.

For those in a season of dying, Jesus's resurrection reminds us that death never has the final word.

For those in a season of planting, Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

For those in a season of pruning, we remember the rich soil — uncrowded by thorns such that seeds can grow freely and fruitfully.

For those in a season of ending, we look to the One who says, "see I am making all things new!"

For those in a season of healing, Jesus said, “come unto me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

For those in a season of breaking down or in seasons of building up, we remember Jesus’s parable about the importance of good foundations to preserve against floods of all kind.

For those in a season of weeping, Jesus says, “blessed are you who weep now, for soon you will laugh.”

For those in a season of laughing, we give thanks for our Lord who rejoices when one who once was lost is now found, no matter if it is a coin, a sheep, or a wayward child.

For those in a season of mourning, Jesus says, “blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted.”

For those in a season of dancing, Jesus says, “rejoice and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.”

For those in a season of tossing, we loosen our grip on that which moth and rust destroy.

For those in a season of gathering, Jesus says, “cast your nets out into the deep water for a catch... for you will be catching people.”

For those in a season of embracing, we remember the God whose loved us so much that he sent his Son to love us, redeem us, rescue us, and embrace us.

For those in a season of refraining, Jesus says, “do not worry about your life: what you will eat, or what you will wear.”

For those in a season of seeking, Jesus said, “seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

For those in a season of losing, Jesus said, “for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

For those in a season of keeping, Jesus says, “be ready, stay awake, be dressed for action; keep your lamps lit; keep watch.”

For those in a season of relinquishing, Jesus says, “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

For those in a season of tearing, Jesus says, “gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be lost.”

For those in a season of sewing, we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

For those in a season of quiet, Jesus says, “pay attention to how you listen.”

For those in a season of speaking, we orient ourselves with the proclamation of the angels: glad tidings of great joy and good news for all people.

For those in a season of loving, Jesus says, “if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them! But love your enemies, do good, lend, expecting nothing in return.”

For those in a season of hating, we are nudged to release our anger by the God who draws us ever closer to Christ by drawing us ever closer to one another.

For those in a season of waging war, Jesus comes with a plowshare and a pruning hook to reorient us to his way of peace.

And for those in a season of waging peace, Jesus says, “do not fear! For it is **my** peace I leave with you.”

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*

#### IV.

In the weddings I’m so privileged to conduct, one question I ask of both parties is this: “will you remain faithful throughout all the changing seasons of life?” No matter the season, no matter the time, no matter who we are or who we’re not, no matter what we’ve done or what we’ve left undone, we can take heart — that God in Christ who came for us and with us will remain faithful to us throughout all the changing seasons of our lives.

So as we look behind us and before us at the turn of a year, might we remember that Christ is with us — Emmanuel! — in this season and all the rest. Thanks be to God!

#### V.

[A poem shared with the congregation as we moved into the closing hymn.]

Alfred Lord Tennyson | “A New Year's Poem”

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light;  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.  
Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.  
Ring out the grief that saps the mind,*



For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.  
Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.  
Ring out the want, the care, the sin,  
The faithless coldness of the times;  
Ring out, ring out my mournful rimes  
But ring the fuller minstrel in.  
Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.  
Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.  
Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.