

Call to Worship

You are God's chosen people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once we were no people, but now we are God's people; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy. Thanks and praise, glory and honor to God of God's saving grace!

Prayer of Invocation

Creative God, you make all things new in heaven and on earth.

We come to you just before a new year with new desires and old fears, new decisions and old controversies, new dreams and old weaknesses.

Because you are a God of hope, we know that you create all of the possibilities of the future.

Because you are a God of love, we know that you accept all of the mistakes of the past.

Because you are the God of our faith, we enter your gates with thanksgiving and praise, we come into your presence with gladness and a joyful noise, and we serve and bless you.

The Word

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens:

a time for giving birth and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted,
**a time for killing and a time for healing, a time for tearing down and a time for building up,
a time for crying and a time for laughing, a time for mourning and a time for dancing,**

a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones, a time for embracing and a time for avoiding embraces,

a time for searching and a time for losing, a time for keeping and a time for throwing away,
**a time for tearing and a time for repairing, a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking,
a time for loving and a time for hating, a time for war and a time for peace.**

What do workers gain from all their hard work? I have observed the task that God has given human beings. God has made everything fitting in its time, but has also placed eternity in their hearts, without enabling them to discover what God has done from beginning to end.

I know that there's nothing better for them but to enjoy themselves and do what's good while they live. Moreover, this is the gift of God: that all people should eat, drink, and enjoy the results of their hard work.

Living the Word

A Toilet Seat for Christmas...One of the most exciting gifts four years ago for Christmas at the Hamblin's was an oak toilet seat. When we built the house 31 years ago one of the upgrades to the bathroom was an oak toilet seat. Several weeks before Christmas 2013, it split, and though I had noticed it, I hadn't done anything about it. After all, I was only home in those days for 2 nights a week. But my husband and sons, who are around more, were concerned.

As we passed out gifts, I handed a very heavy one to my husband. He opened it and very soon after, he installed it. The point is that nothing lasts forever...Though I have to say, I wish other things in the house lasted that long...

Life is filled with new beginnings and new endings. Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us that there is a time for everything. Though I Corinthians 13 – 'the Love chapter' is often used at weddings and funerals, I have shared Ecclesiastes 3 at even more. The Love Chapter is a good reminder of what Love should be like: *"Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, ⁵ it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, ⁶ it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. ⁷ Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails."*

It is something to aspire to, but relationships between people are not always that easy to achieve in an ongoing basis. The Apostle Paul had lofty ideas in its writing, but of course he was never married...whereas, Ecclesiastes has its roots in King Solomon's writings. According to the Bible he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He lived within quite a different reality than the unmarried, Apostle Paul.

The verses of Ecclesiastes 3 covers a much broader life experience. Often when we hear it or read it, we cant really digest it all as it goes by, so I thought we could think about it a little at a time and listen for what God might be saying to us on this season of the change of the year.

3 There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens:

² a time for giving birth and a time for dying,

Physical birth and death...Job 39:1-2 *Do you know when mountain goats give birth; do you observe the birthing of does?*² *Can you count the months of pregnancy; do you know when they give birth?*

Could we have new birth without death? Often the old ideas and understandings have to die in order for us to have new ideas... I like this cartoon: "What's wrong Jesus? You said you wanted a church for your Birthday!" Jesus replies: Yeah, I do... But I'm having trouble getting it out of the box!"

a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted, As for planting and uprooting...Agriculture has taught us through time that not only do plants have a cycle to be tended to, but also they need to be rotated with other crops for the soil to remain healthy, generation to generation.

³ a time for killing and a time for healing, I have a hard time with this one, as I don't believe in taking human life, but killing and healing can refer to many other forms besides human life. Lots of need for healing...Does anyone have a thought about a time to kill?

a time for tearing down and a time for building up, I remember a story a few years back of the 19-story Genesee Tower building in Flint, Mich., which was imploded to make way for a new park. About 1000pounds of explosives were used with 200 construction workers on site to ensure everything went as planned. There is a place in our world for explosives, but often things are ripped apart at the wrong times for the wrong reasons. Even so when things are torn apart we need to rebuild...

⁴ a time for crying and a time for laughing,

a time for mourning and a time for dancing, Crying and laughing are both healthy responses to who we are as humans. Anyone who has grieved for a loved one knows that mourning comes and goes between the dances of life...

⁵ a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,

Interesting that I have always thought that all of this must apply to humans. But what about anger release of just throwing stones? Why would one gather stones, but in preparation to throw them?

a time for embracing and a time for avoiding embraces, I have to admit this brings to mind young love, when it is hard to embrace and then hard to let go...

⁶ a time for searching and a time for losing,

a time for keeping and a time for throwing away, At this point in my life there are more times of losing than I care to admit, but is this more about letting go of some things we desired and then held too tightly to? Have you noticed that each verse is a couplet? Two phrases...possibly they were put together to be ruminated on together.

⁷ a time for tearing and a time for repairing,

a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking, If we read these two together, it becomes all about relationships. Sometimes we have to tear our relationships by letting go for the relationship to grow in a new

direction... Often in relationships we need to do some repairing...I know I am a talker, so I have had to learn that there is a time to keep silent and a time for speaking.

⁸ a time for loving and a time for hating,

a time for war and a time for peace. Again I am bothered that this writer believed there is a time for war. Yet, I know that there are times to take a stand, for what is right. I have enough of a 'Polly Anna Attitude to believe that peace is possible, but I also know that peace takes a lot of hard work...

⁹ What do workers gain from all their hard work? ¹⁰ I have observed the task that God has given human beings. ¹¹ God has made everything fitting in its time, but has also placed eternity in their hearts, without enabling them to discover what God has done from beginning to end. As we continue on the journey with Christ to reach closer to God, we can know the hope of something greater beyond this life, even though we can't know when the end of this life will come for each of us.

¹² I know that there's nothing better for them but to enjoy themselves and do what's good while they live. ¹³ Moreover, this is the gift of God: that all people should eat, drink, and enjoy the results of their hard work. Doing what is good, and then enjoying the results of our labors. At Christmas some of us live in a surreal world filled with giving and hope and cookies. But it doesn't have to end as we turn to a new year.

Christmas doesn't officially end until the 12th day and we are only on day 7 (geese-a laying). On Thursday morning, I went through the drive through at the Credit Union. The tellers all know me and after my transaction one of them wished me Happy New Year. I quickly assured her it was still Christmas, that we were on day four and I wasn't sure what I was going to do with four callings birds, and in fact this week there were just too many birds arriving. She laughed and waved as I drove off. On Friday, I stopped again. The same teller came to the window and before I drove off said with a glint in her eye: Five gold rings – have a great day! Merry Christmas!

Second, we may have to look to the resolutions of better diet and less spending when Christmas is over for this season, but one of the New Year's resolutions can be to draw nearer to God and the ones we love this coming year.

The service this morning was put together with the scriptures as the center. The liturgy we read together and the songs we are singing all tell about how we can handle the past and the future.

You were Called to worship as "God's chosen people" acknowledging that "we were once no people, but now we are God's people." It is true, each of us at some point and to some degree had to get to know God and accept that God has chosen us to be God's people for this time and place.

In the Prayer of Invocation we addressed God with these words: "we come...with new desires and old fears," stating that we know God is a "God of hope" – continuing to create new possibilities for us in our lives; a "God of Love" – able to see beyond and forgive our past mistakes; and a "God of faith" inviting us to thanksgiving and ways to express our love in return through service.

God's response comes to us through scriptures that are several thousands of years old: "*There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens:*"

Just as the rest of this scripture tells us, life is filled with the good and the bad, the hard and the easy, the opposites sometimes both at the same time, sometimes bittersweet...

Often there are no adequate words to address what is happening in any given moment. Yet, if we know our Creator, if we have spent time realizing that what we have to offer can be enough, God accepts these gifts, whatever they are.

The music composers and the hymn writers have gotten to that place. Their gift is to express what we might be feeling at any given moment, especially when we cannot find the words.

This week, I had the opportunity to sing Joy to the World, along with a marvelously huge and great Choir, backed by a full orchestra. My heart was beating hard and I sang for all I was worth. The words have all the meaning of Hope, Peace, joy and love of Christmas. I am so grateful that I bought their CD, the sound not only filled the car, but must have electrified the air around us.

I can sing alone, but surrounded by others, in this case a large choir, I know that we are in this together. Here at church it is the same...in a different way. We are coming through the season of Christmas, and before it is finished, now we are looking toward a new year, together!

In the hymns this morning there are some phrases I would point out to you, just in case you missed them: *God of the Ages* – “Refresh thy people on their toilsome way; lead us from night to never-ending day; fill all our lives with love and grace divine, and glory, laud and praise be ever thine.”

If Thou but Suffer God to Guide Thee – “God will give strength, whatever betide thee and bear thee through the evil days. God never yet forsook at need the soul that trusted God indeed.”

That was written in the 1600s, so the words sound a bit odd to us. Let me update it some for you: ‘If you let God guide you, God will give you strength, whatever the matter under heaven that you are facing, including the evil days. God hasn’t yet forsaken and soul in need that trusted God.’ (My version won’t sing as well to the music...)

Shortly, we are going to sing “*Womb of Life* - ` and source of being, home of every restless heart, in your arms the world awakened: you have loved us from the start. You have come to stand beside us, knowing weakness, knowing earth. We would share your life, your passion, share your word of world made new...”

And our last song will be a Quaker Song, written in 1848, *Simple Gifts* – “’Tis the gift to be simple, ’tis the gift to be free; ’Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right, ’Twill be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gained, To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed, To turn, turn will be our delight, Till by turning, turning we come ’round right.”

Each of these writers and composers have experienced some of the good and the bad matters under heaven. They write from their own understandings and faith as they know it. They give us words to express in our lives what we are feeling and remind us of a God who is always with us through time.

That is how we face and embrace a new year ahead, because we are surrounded by a great cloud of people who have shared their gifts of hope, peace, love and faith. There are new things coming and if we share our gifts of faith, the church will continue, though it may look very different.

I invite you to find a devotional book and get into the habit of reading a page or so a day or start reading your Bible and ponder what God might be trying to say to you. I guarantee that this will help you draw closer to God and to each other. You can find the time. As the scripture says: *There is a time for every matter under heaven...*