

12 years together we did not grow in Sunday School attendance. However, something amazing happened in November and December. We have not only begun a growth pattern again, but we actually had the best four weeks in a row of attendance that we have ever had during the Advent Season. I am meeting new people every week who are coming and discovering this wonderful congregation.

This brings me to this conclusion about our congregation. It is true that we have been in a winter season for a few years, but we are not going to be here long. We needed a season to prepare and to catch our breath. Remember I said that winter is also the time when hope is born for the next spring. That is where we are. We are putting down deeper roots; we are getting prepared for the next step and for what God has for our future together.

I know that our congregation has enlarged to the place where there might be some who say, where will new people will find a place in worship, in the parking lot, in most Sunday School classes? It is true we can be crowded most Sundays, but I submit to you that the next spring is on the way. We must find ways to not only include others, but to invite others to join us in our ministry together.

This past Christmas Eve something wonderful happened. It was something I reflected on during our Christmas Eve service. You see nearly 40 years ago a young married couple wandered through the doors of Trinity Baptist Church. They could have gone to so many other more established churches, but they chose Trinity. They made it their home and became involved. They had their children and raised them in the church. Their oldest daughter spent her time in the nursery being rocked by some of you. She spent her time in the Preschool and Children's Ministry and choirs being taught by some of you. She spent her teen years involved in the Youth Ministry even being taught by me for one year and then by Rev. Warren and many of you. Then she went away for while only to return and get married and she and her husband made their home at Trinity, as well. On Christmas Eve this same young woman who is now expecting her first child stood next to me as one of our Deacon Officers and assisted me in leading us at the Lord's Table during communion. This is a special place. You are a special people. There are very few places left in Baptist life where a daughter could be born and grow up to not only believe they have a place of leadership, but actually be able to lead. That does not

happen everywhere. But it does here. That is why we must make a place for others.

We don't know when the next young couple will walk through the doors and say we are home. They will put down roots and it will transform their lives and the lives of their children and children's children. We don't know when the next young single adult who moves to North Hills will wonder, is there a church like where I grew up? Is there a community of faith where people of every age are valued? Is there a church that is like a family? We do not know when the next family that is transferred to Raleigh will walk in and discover a church that will invest in the faith formation of their children and teenagers so they can face this changing culture as young adults. We don't know who will be the next senior adult who moves in to be with their children and will be asking is there a church that believes I still have something of worth to offer? We don't know when an empty nest couple who has had to leave all their friends and come to a new place will walk through the doors wondering if there is a place they can find community?

We don't know who they will be but this we can be sure, they will come and when they do we must make room for them not only on our campus but in our lives. That is what this church is all about. It has always been about being ready for the next spring.

My friends we have been in winter for a few years. We have been preparing, getting ready, and catching our breath for what God is going to do. Winter is where our roots go deeper and is where the hope of spring is born. Spring is coming for us again but we must embrace it. We must be faithful through it.

Let us embrace the season of our life whatever it might be and let us embrace the season of life our church is passing through. There is a time for everything and timing is everything. This is our time.

<sup>1</sup>James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill. 2009) 175.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. 174.

<sup>3</sup>Mike Glenn, *Learning the Seasons of the Soul* (Preaching Magazine, September/October, Vol.27, No. 2) 34.



# The Trinity Pulpit

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## Timing is Everything

### Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

Dr. Jeff Roberts

Think of all the songs about time; "Does Anyone Know What Time It Is?", "Time is On My Side", "I Hope You had The Time of Your Life", "As Time Goes By" and of course "Time in a Bottle."

We sometimes think we can save time in a bottle. The truth is we spend a lot of time trying to manage time. We think wrongly that we can save time, borrow time, manage time and control time when really we can only use time.

Did you know that the first clock was created by monks? They invented the clock because they wanted to regulate their lives of work and prayer. In the sixth century the rules of St. Benedict declared that idleness was the enemy of the soul, therefore monastic communities needed to control and use time for work and for prayer. The clock allowed the Monks to precisely regulate their daily activities. Each day a monk would watch the clock and ring the bell at the appointed time for work or prayer. In 1370 a public clock was erected in Cologne Germany. The city passed an ordinance establishing hours of work and set curfews for the first time. In this one moment we began to be controlled not by natural time of sunrise and the seasons of fall, winter, spring and summer but by artificial measurement of time in hours, minutes and seconds. It could be argued that this was the first step from being in harmony with the passing of time to seeking to control it and by doing so became controlled by it.<sup>1</sup>

Jeremy Rifkin writes these words concerning our stress from time:

*It is ironic that in a culture so committed to saving time we feel increasingly deprived of the very thing we value. We have quickened our pace of life only to become less patient. We have become more organized and less spontaneous, less joyful. We are better prepared to act on the future but less able to enjoy the present and reflect on the past. Today we have sur-*

*rounded ourselves with time saving technology gadgetry, only to be overwhelmed by plans we cannot carry out, appointments that cannot be honored, schedules that cannot be fulfilled and deadlines that cannot be met.<sup>2</sup>*

So the poet writes, there is a time for everything under heaven. There is a time to give birth and there is a time to die. There is a time to plant and a time to uproot. There is a time to kill and a time to heal. There is a time to tear down and a time to build. There is a time to weep and a time to laugh. There is a time to mourn and a time to dance. There is a time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain. There is a time to search and a time to give up. There is a time to keep and a time to throw away. There is a time to tear and a time to mend. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. There is a time to love and a time to hate. There is a time for war and a time for peace.

In these beautiful words we find not only the poet's words of fatalism, but that of faith and realism. The poet is not calling us to a life of defeat but one of faith and victory. This is not a word about you can't change anything it is instead, a word about God's presence in all of life and the longing in the human heart for more than just the cycle of events. Whether it is the birth of your child or the death of your parent, God is God. Whether it is a time of planning or time of ending, God is God. It does not matter if the world is filled with violence or beauty, God is God. No matter if you are weeping, alone, about to give up and torn apart by life, God is still God. If at this point in life you are alone or if you are in a meaningful relationship, God is still God.

The Poet adds to this beautiful prose this thought, "God has made everything beautiful in its time and set eternity in the hearts of men."

The writer seems to be telling us that this is life. There is a time for all of these things in our lives, but God makes even the difficult ones beautiful when we seek God.



When we were young before the digital clock you had to be able to tell time by looking at a traditional clock. Although when you think about it, the system does not seem to make sense, still learning to tell time was an important part of a child's education. You can still remember using a paper plate and a paper clip with construction paper hands and making a clock and practicing telling time. Telling time is important. It still is important to be able to tell what time it is in our lives. There is a time for everything and timing is everything.

Let me suggest to us today that this passage addresses three lies about time. The first lie is that you can have everything at the same time. We live in a culture that says to us you can have everything at the same time if you will just discipline your life and control time. So, we go about our lives with a great determination living frustrated everyday thinking that surely we can have it all at the same time. Yet, when we look at the passage we discover that the things mentioned in the passage are in direct opposition to each other. The poet preacher is telling us we cannot have everything at the same time. You cannot do these things at the same time. You cannot mend and tear at the same time. You cannot scatter and gather stones at the same time. You cannot keep and throw away at the same time. Choices have to be made in response to time. So it is with you and me. We cannot have everything at the same time, so we have to make choices of priorities.

We have to be able to discern what time is it and choose that which is important at this time. That applies to our lives in regards to our age, our families, our work schedules, our finances and our relationships. We must make choices we cannot have everything at the same time.

The second lie is that everyone else's time is better than my time. Maybe we should say that we sometimes perceive that we are the only ones passing through all of the emotions of the items mentioned in Ecclesiastes 3. It seems that others skate through life with only the good things that are mentioned. The Bible is trying to tell us that we all experience these things and when we experience them does not mean that somehow we are being punished by God, while God is blessing others. Just the opposite is true. The word to us is that we all experience these earthly experiences and how we receive them makes all the difference in the world.

If we back up to Chapter 2 we find these words in verse 24 and following: A man can do nothing better that to eat, drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see is from the hand of God for without him who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God

gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

The one who pleases God finds provision and joy but the one who is the sinner, turns against God might think he is finding happiness only to see it all disappear in the end with great futility. The lie about time is that other's time is better than my time but the truth is we all experience this earthly life and we find purpose, meaning and joy in all of life when we strive to please God.

The third lie is that seasons never change. There are many in our culture who believe they can somehow hold off the changing seasons of life. Our culture says every season should be spring. Every season of life should be filled with growth, anticipation, and we should always be busy, always be starting something new, always trying to make something happen. One writer comments there is a name for something that always is growing and that name is cancer. A cancer is a group of cells that will not stop growing but is out of control.<sup>3</sup> A forever spring is an out of control life.

We must learn to accept, embrace and celebrate that seasons change. Each season has an important role. The spring is a time of new growth and beginnings. The summer is a time of vitality and getting things done. The fall is a time of the harvest, reflection and celebration. Even the winter has a purpose. It is a time for roots to grow deep and for hope for the next spring to be born. Seasons change and we should thank the Lord.

Timing is everything and there is a time for everything. The question we must now raise is what season of life do you find yourself immersed in at this moment. What time is it for you?

It might be spring for you. You are embarking on something new. It might be a new job, a transition to a new experience, a new relationship or maybe just a new project at work and those moments are exciting. Celebrate the new challenge. Rejoice in the new opportunity. For others it might be summer. The newness has worn off but the vitality for the opportunity is still there. You can still bring your energy to the task, the relationship and the situation. Rejoice that God gives you strength for the task. Still some are finding that they are in the season of fall. We fear the fall because we know that the fall leads to winter, but the fall should be a moment of celebration. It should be the times in our lives when we feel accomplishment and satisfaction. It should be the time we look back and smile. It should be the time when we can say to God "You were with me through it all. I can see now that but by the grace of God this blessing would have never been mine." The fall is a time to celebrate

God's blessings.

Then there is the winter. The winter time can be so scary. It can be a time when things come to a halt. It can be a time when things are lonely. It can be a time when the thought of anything new in the future seems like only a dream or maybe more like a fantasy. However, the winter plays an important role in the seasons of the earth. It is the time when the earth is replenished. It is the time when the roots go deeper. It is the time when you catch your breath and get prepared for the next spring.

I have Bermuda grass in my yard. Not by a master plan or by wanting to save water during the droughts, but out of pure neglect. I have Bermuda grass. So over the past few weeks my yard has turned brown. Next door to me there is beautiful fescue and a green yard that looks like the spring. Not mine, mine is brown and appears dead. Now I know in my mind it is not dead, it is just the season. I know because I have seen it before go from brown to green and be green in the summer when other yards turn brown for lack of water. I know the process, but still every winter I wonder "will it do it again?" "Is it possible for this brown grass to be green again?" The answer is, of course. Even though it is not so now, in the winter there is born the hope of the spring.

In the winter our roots go deeper and there is born the hope of spring. Every season is important in life so embrace it.

Spiritually we must embrace the seasons of life. If it is spring and your faith is fresh and new and you are growing give God thanks. If it is summer and you are serving with great vigor and vitality give thanks to God for showing you how you can serve His kingdom. If it is fall in your spiritual life, give thanks to God for all that God has done over the years. It is winter, do not despair. If God seems far away, silent, and each day seems the same spiritually, embrace it. Dig deeper into God's word, pray more and not less. It is in the winter we get prepared for the next spring. God is always moving us to the next growth moment but guess what, "it takes time."

Telling the time is important in our lives. What time is it for you? Embrace it and give God thanks regardless of the season of your life.

Just as it is important to tell the right time as individuals, it is important to be able to tell the right time for

our lives together. What season do we find ourselves in at Trinity. Well of course this is probably subjective, because we all have different experiences at church and we have all arrived at different times in the life of the church. However, as your pastor let me make a few comments about where I find our congregation as we begin 2012.

In our nearly dozen years together, we have passed through several seasons together. We began with the newness of spring. New things, new ministers, new staff, new ideas and new ministries and new people. That is a part of beginnings. Then we had a great summer time. As we finished the Building of the Children's Building and the ROC we began to see our ministry grow and expand in so many ways. Over the past few years we have looked back on those years and given thanks for all that God has done. As I look upon this congregation, I am grateful for all the new folks that God has added to our congregation and who have come to share in our life together at Trinity.

As I explained last year, churches go through seasons. We had very steady growth for nearly 10 years and then

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the past two to three years we have plateau in our attendance and in many ways our ministries and programs. This is normal and to be expected. There has to be times to take a breath, to asses where we are and to reengage for the future.

I feel in many ways this is where we find ourselves today. We are in a winter of sorts. The past year we asked you to consider "taking the next step". It was a way of encouraging us all to go deeper. To put our roots down deeper in the life of our church. In addition, this past year has seen our continued planning stage for our church's future in regards to our campus. Our Facilities Long Range Planning Committee has been hard at work for 2 years now to present to us a dream and plan for future campus expansion, which will enable us to continue to grow in the future. At current, our Financial Assessment Committee has studied the plan and our finances and will be reporting to us in January's Church Conference their findings and recommendations about future campus expansion. All of this has been going on while we have experienced a plateau in attendance and ministries over the past two years.

I shared with the Deacons in November that I was probably going to have to stand here on this day and share with the church that this was the first year in our