

“THE GIFT OF TIME”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; James 5:7-8

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For everything there is a season.... There is a time for everything.

And right now, there is the season of Advent ... What is this season for?

It's a time for preparation, expectancy, excitement. A time for twinkling lights and candles and carols. A time for goodwill and acts of kindness. A time for crowds and hustle and bustle. A time for lists and obligations and expectations. A time for shopping and baking and decorating. A time for traditions and parties and gift-giving. A time for waiting and a time for hurrying. A time for showing love and reconnecting with old friends and enjoying children. A time for generosity to those in need and prayers for peace in the world and remembering loved ones no longer with us. A time for manger scenes and church and childlike wonder. A time for reflection and a time for praise.

Sacred time, stressful time; Joyous time, depressing time. A time for renewing hope and a time for asking, “how long, O Lord?” A time for looking for light in the darkness and asking what the birth of that baby means to us.

How on earth can one season, four short weeks, hold all this?

There is a time for everything, we read.

But time often seems fraught with anxiety for us, and rarely more so than at this time of year. It can be pretty hard for us to maintain the attitude of the author of Ecclesiastes – balanced and measured, unhurried, without any illusion of being in control - a kind of radical acceptance of the dark and the light, the active and the passive, the ups and downs, the different kinds of seasons that life brings. There is a time for everything, but maybe not everything at once; this is hard for us to grasp.

This Advent, we are reflecting, as we often do, on some of God's gifts to us that belong especially to the Advent season, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But this year we aren't talking about hope, peace, joy and love, or about the things the characters in the Christmas story teach us. Instead we are thinking about gifts we may not, perhaps, always think of as gifts. Not unlike the Christmas present that arrives “some assembly required,” many of God's gifts force us to work a bit. They come with blessings but also inherent challenges. Sometimes they might not feel at all like gifts.

Time is one of those two-edged-sword type of gifts.

Sometimes it seems interminable ... waiting for Christmas to come, for a loved one to come home, for test results, for healing, for news about a job.

But sometimes we wonder where the day went, or the month, or even a couple of decades. How did those kids grow up so fast? Why didn't we manage to do what we wanted to do?

We are aware - we get more and more aware as we get older – that our time on this earth is not unlimited. The question posed by poet Mary Oliver becomes more urgent: “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?” (p. 94)

Maybe it's partly a failure to address that question; in any case, in our society we relate to time in some kind of bizarre ways.

Some of us put a lot of energy into nostalgia for some earlier time, which usually means we aren't seeing what might be good about *now*. Others of us are looking to a future time when we'll do those things we've dreamed of or deal with those important issues or finish those long-postponed tasks. We miss a lot of “now” this way, too.

We gripe endlessly about not having enough time; we fantasize about more hours in the day. But then we let reality TV, online shopping, games on our phones, social media, gossip, and a dozen other means of amusing ourselves consume hours upon hours. This stuff can be absorbing, even addicting... but it doesn't feed the soul.

However... I don't see the opposite extreme as much better. Perhaps you took to heart what the writer of Ephesians said about “making the most of the time” (Ephesians 5:16) or your mom's insistence on “doing something constructive,” leading you to avoid “time wasting.” But that can be stifling and joyless. Filling our days with work and tasks and to-do lists doesn't feed the soul, either. Surely we are on this earth for bigger purposes than substantial savings accounts and employee of the month awards and organized garages. Surely we need a space in our days for dreaming, and real rest, and prayer, and worship, and healing, and the slow awakening of wisdom.

Consider for a moment how we talk about time: as a commodity, as something to control, even sometimes as an enemy. We talk about “spending” time, “wasting” time, “managing” or “organizing” our time better. We talk about being “productive” and “efficient.” We “race against time.” We say we need “more time.”

But each day, for each one of us, has the same 24 hours. Maybe we don't need more time, but a different relationship with time. I'm not urging us to have better time management. I'm suggesting that we might need to look at our time, our lives, differently – see them as part of God's time.

We live, mostly in “Chronos” time – the time of clocks and calendars and schedules and deadlines, the time that is structured, linear, marching mercilessly on....

That's a big part of our truth about time: it's finite. We don't like that much. We hate it when it means the loss of a loved one or unfulfilled dreams. But the fact that it is finite is also what makes time so precious. It's part of the gift.

But even if time is finite, it is also, in some sense, open. We have so much power to choose how we will live in each day and each season. That is another side of the gift: time is

opportunity and growth and a bigger vision. Our lives are part of God's bigger story. This is "Kairos" time ... God's time, in which there is enough time for what is really needed.

In God's time, we understand the paradoxical nature of who we are: We are time-bound beings, with an awareness of the eternal ... and we are never more aware of this than during Advent, which is all about the Eternal God entering into time ... taking on the limits and the possibilities of a human life. This is one of those mysteries we may never be able to fully grasp.

2017 doesn't begin until January 1, but the church calendar begins with Advent. Today we start a new Christian year, with its seasons that help us remember the story of our faith. Because we shape our life of faith and worship this way, we experience the same stories again and again, but they are always somehow new. We change, the world changes, we experience the gospel in ways that are perhaps not quite the same as before. Something is always new. There is always a new beginning. Every Advent is an invitation to a new beginning.

"For everything there is a season," the author of Ecclesiastes writes. He goes on to talk about eating and drinking (that sounds appropriate for Advent!) and taking pleasure in our work. But he is not really telling us to "grab the gusto" and "seize the day" but to understand that each day is God's gift. So we hear, for Advent, something we have heard before but perhaps cannot hear too often: "Receive the day; receive the gift."

Advent is holy time. So, let us receive the gift of these days in gratitude. This Advent, let us believe that there is time for everything really important.

In Advent, there is time for celebrating Jesus birth, and maybe for allowing something new to be born in us. And there is time for sober remembering that in choosing to be born among us, God also chose the finitude of human life, bounded by birth and death, as our lives are.

In Advent, there is time for planting seeds that we may never see "results" from - being generous without expectation, modelling kindness and grace, making the world better for our children in whatever ways we can.

In Advent, there is time to do the necessary and good work God have given us, and to be grateful for the ability to do it and for its rewards.

In Advent, there is time to begin to put to death in our hearts and minds the impulses that eat away at our humanity: arrogance, greed, racism ... all the '-isms.'

In Advent, there is time to heal from the hurts that the world inflicts and also to be, ourselves, that non-anxious healing presence for the vulnerable and broken around us.

In Advent, there is time to love – the people nearest to us, the stranger in whom we may see the face of Christ, those who are hard to love, those who are starving for love. In Advent, there is room in our hearts for compassion for sisters and brothers who are hungry and in need.

In Advent, there is time to let go of whatever it is that's weighing you down, whether that is too much stuff in the garage or obsessive worry or resentment or regret or pressure to be something you are not.

In Advent, there is time to embrace the particular blessings of where you are at this moment in your life, and the people around you, and the gifts they want to share with you.

In Advent, there is time to laugh and dance, to perpetuate silly traditions, to find joy in giving and in receiving, to let the music of the season carry us away, to give thanks and praise God.

In Advent, there is time to weep, because we are human and we have pain and disappointment, and in this season we feel the absence of those we have lost.

In Advent, there is time for peace... stopping to let God quiet our souls in the midst of the noise and stress as we pray for quieting of the guns and bombs that terrorize people in so many places, and as we seek to make peace with those we have wronged.

In Advent, there is time to dedicate ourselves anew to fight for justice and against the forces of destruction which are so powerful in our world.

In Advent, there is time to dismantle the barriers we have erected between ourselves and others, to reach out as God in Jesus reached out to us.

In Advent there is time to begin to build something new and hopeful in the world.

These holy days of Advent invite us into new awareness of all time as sacred, all our days as God's days. In this season "when we seek to open our hearts to receive the ever-new gift of God in Christ" (Davis, p. 119) may we breathe deeply of God's grace and know each day as a gift.

Resources:

There Is a Season by Joan Chittister, art by John August Swanson

Getting Involved with God, by Ellen Davis

"The Summer Day" in *New and Selected Poems*, by Mary Oliver