

## **September 20, 2020 Sermon – Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Luke 4:18**

What time is it? Not clock time but life time?

Each one of us chooses, day by day, moment to moment, how we will use the time we have.

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes lists a number of times many people experience from birth to death and a number of things in between those two times, including a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance. I wonder how many of us feel like weeping and mourning at this time in our lives and how many feel like laughing and dancing?

My mother lives in a retirement home and she receives a monthly newsletter which often includes a story about one of the residents who lives there. Recently, I read an article about a woman named, Anne, who contracted scarlet fever when she was a child that required her to be isolated in a hospital room for a month or so. She could have used that time in her life to complain and become depressed but spent many hours playing with 3 stuffed toy giraffes instead. Several years later, as a young woman, Anne travelled to Africa to study giraffe's in their natural habitat. Recently, she received the Order of Canada because of what she accomplished. The local newspaper wrote an article about her life as well. I share this story with you today to point out that we always have a choice as to how we will use the time we have been given, regardless of what that time might be like.

There are many stories of people who have used a time of forced solitude or a time of decreased activity to reflect on their lives or study and increase their knowledge or delve into their spirituality or use that time in some way to improve their lives.

We are presently in a time, worldwide, where many people feel they have been forced to slow down, go into isolation, or decrease their activities. Some of these people are angry and upset about this and demand that things go back to the way they once were because they feel robbed or cheated out of the time they have left in their lives. Other people have accepted this new reality they live in and have used it to find ways to be of service, reaching out to help people in need and giving of their time for the good of others. A lot of people are doing a bit of both – complaining about how unfair this time is while also seeking to use it in a manner that is helpful – floating back and forth between the two.

It's difficult to always stay positive and not become just a bit bitter or frustrated about the time we are living in. Nobody likes to be told that they can't do something that they think is perfectly acceptable or safe. Nobody likes to be told they have to do something they would rather not. As we live in a time of pandemic I've heard people say they are experiencing COVID fatigue or COVID irritation or COVID frustration or COVID burnout. I can understand why they are making such statements. I've been feeling a bit that way at times too.

Which got me to thinking about how Jesus and others who have lived through much worse times than we are presently living in have used their time?

My wife recently showed me a video clip someone had sent her in which a man who had lost all four limbs because of a bomb, used his time of forced hospitalization to learn how to walk using artificial legs and to grasp things with an artificial arm and hand. The video also explained how important it was to this man to have his wife of less than a year stand by him and encourage him throughout this time in his life. He is now an inspirational speaker. Both of these people used their time to heal and build up instead of using it to break down and kill. We've probably all seen videos of this kind that show people with serious injuries go on to live productive and meaningful lives, primarily because they used a very difficult life time in a way that demonstrated hope and love instead of despair and fear.

As we are now in the month of September, I must also mention the story of Terry Fox who used the last several months of his life to run halfway across Canada in his Marathon of Hope to raise funds for cancer research. For the past 39 years an annual Terry Fox run has raised millions of dollars in this cause. Can you imagine how different it would be for Canadians if Terry had chosen to let his life situation bring him to despair and use his life time to wallow in sorrow and pity instead of using that time to inspire and plant hope?

Christianity would not even exist as a religion if Jesus had decided to use his life time to look after himself, using his unique abilities and qualities to advance his own causes, instead of using them to speak up for the oppressed, the lonely, the outcast, and the poor. He said that his life purpose was to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18) Can you imagine how different the world would be if Jesus had chosen to keep silent instead of speaking out against oppression or allowed a spirit of hatred to fill him instead of a spirit of love?

We are all in a time when life seems unfair, difficult, or downright lousy, and for some it surely is, but the reality is that many people, at least in Canada, are continuing to enjoy many good things. We still have food available to us in stores, farmer's markets, and in our gardens. We have hospitals and health professionals who are able and willing to do what they can to help us through sickness and injury. We have an education system that is providing a quality education for our children and young adults. We have a government that is elected by the people and doing what it can to provide financial support to those without work or unable to work. We have the freedom to worship without fear of oppression and can do so through technology and small group gatherings if we decide it is not time to do so in our church buildings. We have a social support system in place to help those who would not survive without it. We have a country free of war and one in which peaceful protests are not only allowed but encouraged as a way to make positive change. We have safe and quality housing for most citizens and are trying to make sure it is available for all citizens. We have all this and more to give thanks for. There are some people in Canada who are still suffering and struggling greatly because we are not yet managing to do all these things as well as we should be, but we are much more fortunate than many people living in this world at this time. Let us not forget that the next time we are tempted to complain and moan and groan about how tough we have it. Let us use this life time to work together for the good of all even if it is a time when we are to refrain from embracing. Let us use this time to make Canada a country where everyone is welcome, everyone is important, everyone is safe, everyone is loved, everyone is treated with respect, and everyone experiences the good news of good health, the end of oppression and the Lord's favour.

Last Sunday was the first in-person worship service I have been part of since March 15<sup>th</sup> when the government shut down in church worship services because of the coronavirus. We held the service in a large shed or barn like structure with a wide door on rollers that could be left open to let plenty of fresh air into the building. We followed the health policies of physical distancing, wearing facemasks, using hand sanitizers and not singing. We found ways to make the worship service meaningful through the use of technology with projectors, screens, the playing of music, the words of scripture and through prayer. But, in my opinion, one other thing that made the service meaningful was the opportunity for people to look into the eyes of friends and church members they may have not seen for six months and to worship with them in person. They may not have been able to see the smiles on each other's faces but they could see the smiles in their eyes. While worshipping through

the use of online worship and video chat is helpful and can be meaningful, there is something about gathering together in the same place in a safe manner that is so necessary for our well-being. It's even possible that not being able to worship in this way for so long made the experience even more valuable and nurturing.

I came away from that worship service with genuine thankfulness for so many things and with a deeper appreciation of how important it is to gather with others in a setting where everyone is giving thanks and enjoying each other's company. I have used this time of forced isolation from in-person worship to lead worship in other ways but also to reflect on what it means to be "church" and to "worship." I've also used this time in my life to think about family and who is part of my "family." The length of time I have had to go without seeing my children and grandchildren in-person has made the times when I can actually be with them more important and treasured. I've come to appreciate that while my immediate family will always be most important to me, my "family" has extended to include many other people who are not related to me by blood lines. These family members are important to me as well.

I share this with you because I imagine many of you are having similar experiences and have been using this time for self-reflection, growth, and inspiration. We need not see this life time we are now living in as a negative, a loss of time, and as being robbed of life experiences. We can see it as a positive, a gain of time, and as being given the gift of life experiences we would never have had if things had continued on as normal without this virus.

What are you going to do with this time of pandemic you are now living in, regardless if it lasts for another month, 6 months or 2 years? Will you make good use of it? Will you use it to think about all the things you've lost or all the things you've gained? Will you allow it to lead you into despair and depression or allow it to lead you into hope and joy? Will you be filled with anxiety or with peace?

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven – this is a season unlike any most of us have ever known before – unless you're well over 100 years old and lived through the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920, and so far this is not nearly as bad as that was. Let's hope it stays that way. If we follow the health recommendations and all do our part we should not experience the same sort of devastation that accompanied that pandemic. We

have much better knowledge, health care, and other things in place to help us get through this.

I wonder how many of our children will end up being like Anne in the story I began this message with and use this time in their lives to be inspired to make a positive and inspirational difference in this world? I wonder how many of us will come out of this time with a greater appreciation of life, of one another, of our freedoms, of our country, and of our God?

