

May 15, 2022 (Final Sunday – ELPC) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Ecclesiastes 3:1–12](#)

TITLE: **For Everything There is a Season**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

And so today is finally here. May 15th has been on my mind for months now. I've written and delivered about 1000 sermons since coming to ELPC in 2006. This one feels different because it's a final sermon—made of final words. I looked up on the internet some examples of famous final words. Only rarely are they truly memorable. (Steve Jobs, Richard Mellon) Humphrey Bogart said “I should have never switched from Scotch to Martinis.” Oscar Wilde died in a Paris hotel. Shortly before his death he evidently looked around the room and with his final breath said, “Either that wallpaper goes or I do.”

I've known this day and this sermon were coming. For weeks now the sun has risen each morning and set each evening until May 15th dawned at last. But there is comfort in knowing that the sun will rise and set again tomorrow as well; that life goes on for us all. That's part of the reason why the well-known verses from Ecclesiastes 3 are regularly read at church services. They remind us of the comforting cycles of life. “*For everything there is a season: A time to be born and a time to die; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted.*” Like breathing in and breathing out, life has symmetry to it—day, night; summer, winter. And as it says in Fiddler on the Roof: “One season following another, laden with happiness and tears.”

Every life is marked by seasons and patterns of coming and going, hellos and goodbyes. My life has included leaving home to go to college; going overseas to study the piano and then returning home; going to seminary, then leaving the US to serve my first church in Africa; returning to America and accepting a call to a church in Wisconsin. There was meeting my wife Beth and starting a family; completing a PhD and then the move here to Pittsburgh. Seasons to put down roots and seasons to pluck up and start anew. There have certainly been those seasons here at ELPC. Going back over 50 years, there were the days of Dr. Robshaw and Dr. Kettering; seasons with Rev. Hewett and Dr. Chesnut; transition with Rick Otty and Richard Szeremany, and now seasons with myself, Heather, Patrice—Taizé, LGBT inclusion, anti-racism efforts, building renovations, and much, much more.

What's been true in my life and our church's life has assuredly been part of your lives as well. Seasons of coming and going, endings and beginnings. Yet as true as this may be, it is not the full truth. Life is more than just the cycles of day, night, summer, winter. Life has a purpose and a direction. That is why the words of Ecclesiastes are often paired with the words from Revelation, the last book of the bible. Revelation 21 talks about a new heaven and a new earth—not simply one that is the next cycle in the eternal cycles of an old heaven and earth, but a new one altogether. It will be the home of God and of us—a place without death, without mourning and crying and pain and tears. Revelation 22 goes even further and insists that we won't need lights or lamps or the sun because

God will be our light forever and ever. As poetic as that language is, it points to a transformed reality—a different way of being beyond the seasons and cycles of this life.

But even that is not the whole story. Our life is not meant to be a holding pattern until we finally step into the future reality of God's new heaven and earth. That's why we need not only the last book of the bible, but also the first book of the bible—the wisdom found in Genesis. *In the beginning when God was creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void. God said, "Let there be light" and separated the light from the darkness. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.* Here's where the incredible wisdom of the Jewish faith is most evident. We've been taught to think of the day beginning at sunrise and ending at sundown. You get up in the morning with the birds singing; you do your work until it's too dark to see and then you go to bed. But that approach defines the day around what you can accomplish in it—what you can produce, make, earn, and do before the sun sets and nighttime falls.

But the Jewish wisdom in Genesis says "there was evening and there was morning, the first day." When the sun goes down, then the "day" begins. It's precisely when you can't do any work – when life isn't shaped by what you are doing, producing, making, earning—that's when a day begins. It reminds us that God is in charge, to whom darkness is as light; and that we walk by faith, not by sight. At the very moment when you can no longer see, God in effect says, "Look to me. Trust that I am the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and whatever season is before you, I am already there. So let's walk into the evening and the morning together."

One of the most influential seasons in my life happened when I was 19 years old. I received a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship that allowed me to study piano at the music conservatory in Salzburg, Austria. I would be remiss if I didn't note that this opportunity arose because of church friends who were members of the local Rotary club who encouraged me to apply for this scholarship and opened this door for me; and also to humbly name that such opportunities came my way as part of a larger, unjust societal pattern of white privilege and opportunities biased toward Caucasians. That year in Austria was life-changing. I lived in a student dormitory with people from all over the world: Australia, Malaysia, Costa Rica, Israel. We all struggled with a foreign language and a foreign culture—pianists, singers, instrumentalists; students united in our love of music yet frantically adapting to this strange, new, and exhilarating setting. At the end of the school year, one by one friends left and returned home. I remember standing at the dormitory door and waving goodbye to Vasuhi, the Malaysian violinist, Laura, the Costa Rican oboist, Kevin, the Canadian bassoonist—not sure if I'd ever see them again. We'd load their bags in the cab and wave as they drove away. Then at some point, they'd be out of sight—and I'd turn to go back to my room knowing that in a short time, I'd be the one getting into that cab and driving away.

I'm sure you've had similar experiences yourselves: saying goodbye to friends you made at a summer camp; watching as family members or neighbors pull away from the curb when they move to a new place; stepping out of your office for the last time, carrying a box as you move into retirement. You are not most alive when you notice that

life has seasons that unfold inevitably around you. Nor are you most alive when you simply endure the seasons of life looking ahead to some future day of God revealing a new heaven and a new earth. No, I think you are most alive when you stand on the curb waving goodbye to something or someone—and then you take a breath and turn and step toward whatever is next in your life. It is in that moment you answer the question posed by the poet Mary Oliver, “*What then will you do with your one wild and precious life?*” And that moment is most faithful, most significant and honest and worthwhile, when it happens to come as the sun is setting. When you simply cannot do anything else in that moment but give yourself over to God, who is the Lord of night and day, of every season of life. Because yes, for everything there is a season, but by God’s grace and your free will, you shape each season for love or hate, war or peace, building up or tearing down.

I do want to say “Thank you” for the love and support you’ve shown me and my family over the past 16 years. I remain incredibly grateful to this congregation and to the staff here at ELPC—for the ways we’ve walked by faith, tried new things, responded to challenges both inside these walls and out in the community, and sought to be people of justice, compassion, and radical hospitality. When I think about the sermons you’ve heard over the years, the messages from us three pastors have been different yet complementary. Heather and Patrice insist that “God is love” and “Justice must flow down like water.” And in considering the many sermons I’ve given from this pulpit, I think my message has been “Be not afraid. God is with us and sends us out in every season to join Christ in healing the world.” Sunday after Sunday I’ve stared at those Penn Avenue doors. Season after season we’ve stood for a benediction and then taken a step forward by faith into a future held by God, shaped by the good news of Christ’s resurrection, and enlivened by the creative breath of the Holy Spirit.

Normally when Ecclesiastes 3 is read, we stop at verse 8. But after that comes something profound. It says “God has made everything suitable for its time and put a sense of past and future into our minds.” You have not been made to be captive to the changing seasons of life; you have been given the ability to remember the past and to imagine the future. To learn, to dream, to trust, to love. To dare to fix what is broken and cast down what is unworthy. To plant seeds of resurrection hope.

I can’t truly offer you any final words because even though we’ll be in different cities, our conversation doesn’t stop today. It will continue—a chorus of faith lived out and joined together by God’s Holy Spirit. I look forward to hearing from you for all the seasons to come.