

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/SEPTEMBER 13, 2009
CHURCH HOUSE ROCKS/ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15, ROMANS 12:1-2

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I. THE TEXT

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

— Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

We, and the rest of America are in start up mode. Vacations are distant memories, school is back in session, traffic gridlock has resumed. Lazy summer afternoons have given way to the harried days of fall. Hopes and expectations are high as we step into a new year. How appropriate that we take a few minutes this morning to think together about the priorities and values that will give shape to the days to come. Our texts this morning, each in their own way, invite us to reflect on what is most important, on the decisions we make about what we will give our lives to. Hear Paul's perspective on our highest calling from Romans 12...

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

II. PRAYER: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. May these words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts in this hour, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer... Amen.

III. OVERCHOICE AND TIME

At the beginning of the decade that saw the death of Mao Zedong, The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, and America's Watergate, Alvin Toffler wrote a book entitled *Future Shock*. He articulated, almost 40 years ago, the notion of what he called the "peril of overchoice." Toffler observed that the modern world has more choices, more options than any generation in history. While on the surface that may seem a good thing, in reality, overchoice can be a significant problem – too many choices can cause mental circuit-breaker melt down. Too many choices can paralyze. That's why, for example, I hate grocery shopping... overchoice overload. There are now, on average, 40,000 products in a typical grocery store. I can stand in front of the toothpaste aisle for 15 minutes and still not end up with the one I thought I was getting once I open the box at home. There are 52 versions of Crest toothpaste alone – tube, pump, mint, gel, paste, tartar control, flip top, screw top, whitening, etc. etc. Toothpaste is one of 30-60 decisions we make in a typical grocery store visit – do you remember when iceberg lettuce was the **only** option? When Wonder Bread was pretty much it? Overwhelming overchoice is not only a grocery store phenomenon – 225 models of cell phones, 37 available configurations of a Dodge Caravan, 150 pieces of junk mail. When Toffler wrote nearly 40 years ago of the peril of overchoice, I doubt he could have imagined the tidal wave of befuddling, paralyzing, time-eating decisions we make every day. *[statistics from Steven Cristol and Peter Sealey article Is Your Brand a Nuisance, brandchannel.com]*

Nowhere does this sense of overchoice invade our lives than with all of the possibilities – not just in making choices in grocery stores or at Costco – but clamoring for our very lives... for our time. Let's face it, we are a busy people. We all feel it, don't we? The presence, the pressure, the tyranny of the clock. We live with Blackberries and Daytimers and calendars with little remaining white space. Our days are crammed from start to finish. We race to work... race to get the project done on deadline, buy groceries, check email incessantly, live on our cell phones, race down the 405 (well ok, sit for extended periods of time of the 405) and, for the past few years, are pressured to keep up on the great time eater, Facebook. Indeed, the demands on our time are extraordinary. Even our children and high-schoolers are programmed from the wee hours to way past a reasonable bedtime – sleep deprivation is a national epidemic as we burn the candle at both ends. Ever wished there was an 8th day in the week, 3 or 4 additional hours in a day? And, the older I get the faster time seems to go – I have absolutely no idea how it can be possible that I am speeding like a freight train toward my 55th birthday when just yesterday afternoon I was 31. Time... so many choices, too few hours... too few years.

IV. THEOLOGY OF TIME

The preacher, in the text Steve/Francesca read earlier, makes the most outrageous assertion – "there is a time for everything, time for every matter under heaven" he says.

"No!" we argue back – "there is never enough time!"

"Oh, but there is," he counters. "Each of us gets precisely the right amount of time to do and accomplish what is necessary... just the right amount of time for everything under heaven." This text asks us to step back and think about how that could possibly be, given the time stresses and demands that seem to dog us all.

In the Christian tradition, we understand our most basic identity as that of steward – an identity bestowed in the very words of creation. Most often, when we think about stewardship in the church our thoughts turn to money. In the Christian faith, our beginning premise is that our money, every last dime, belongs to God – Christians are called to use God's money in the ways that God asks, and so we talk about giving a percentage of God's money back to God's work in the world. But, if the primary job description given to us in creation is that of steward, we are more than just stewards of God's money – we are caretakers of **all** of God's gifts, including the gift of time. Our time too, is God's, and our call, as stewards, is to use the gift of time in ways that honor God.

Painted on the wall in, of all places, the women's room of a little diner we stopped at in the Adirondacks last weekend, this statement – “We have been given a certain amount of time – the only question is what we will do with it.”

We don't often think about adding “time” to the list of what belongs to God, do we? Our bank statements are spiritual documents, a graphic indicator of our truest values and priorities. Do we see our calendar as a spiritual document? No, our time is our own – we are free to do with it whatever we please. And yet, when we catch ourselves fighting the clock, struggling to find an extra hour of sleep, moaning as we pore over our calendars to find one workable evening for dinner with dear friends, we have to ask – how free are we? Time is apparently not our own. At least it is not ours until we give it back to its rightful owner and ask God how best to use it.

Through the voice of the preacher, God gives us the answer. “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” At first glance today's text seems like a simple description of the activities of life as it meanders along – we are born and we die – we plant seeds and pull up weeds – in life we laugh and cry and dance. But this little poem is much more profound than that. It asks us to go to the deep places of our soul and wrestle with God about how we make decisions about our time, about how we set our priorities. This is really a poem about discernment. If there is a time for everything, what is **this** a time for? If, for everything there is a season, what is **this** season for? At its heart this poem asks us to do a particular sort of work – the work of discerning what time it is. The wise person, we are told, learns to tell the time... to discern what this particular time is for.

It is, indeed, a counter-cultural concept. In fact it can feel a bit risky. If I can't cram everything in... what will happen at work? What will I miss out on? Our appetites for activity have grown every bit as much as our appetites for food... and as our appetites for food are killing us, could it be that our obese calendars are doing just as much harm? Whether there is room for it or not, whether this or that activity is important or not – our clocks and calendars, things intended to bring order into our lives instead cause us to feel terribly out of control. Relationships suffer, we are sleep deprived, our souls shrivel. Perhaps our calendars need to be put on a diet. An African once told an American missionary, “we Africans have time, you westerners have clocks.” With no idea of what activities are truly necessary, with seemingly little ability to set limits or priorities, time takes control of us. And so, tired and frustrated, we sprint through our days... or is that just me?

The ancient preacher says, “Wise people learn to discern what time it is.”

V. BIG ROCKS FIRST

Perhaps you have heard this little story that Stephen Covey tells in his book “First Things First.” One afternoon at a seminar, the presenter pulled out a wide-mouth gallon jar and placed it next to a pile of fist-sized rocks. After filling the jar to the top with rocks, he asked, “Is the jar full?” The group, of course, replied, “Yes.” He then pulled some gravel from under the table and added it to the jar. The speaker jiggled the jar until the gravel filled the spaces between the rocks. Again, he asked, “Is the jar full?” This time, the group, catching on, replied, “Probably not.” The speaker then added some sand and asked, “Is the jar full?”

“No!” shouted the group.

Finally, the speaker filled the jar to the brim with water. He then asked the group the point of this little visual. Someone raised their hand and replied what the whole group was thinking – that you could always fit more things into your life if “you really work at it.”

“No,” countered the speaker. “The point is, if you don't put the big rocks in first, you won't get them in at all.” He continued with a question, “what are the big rocks in your life – time with loved ones, your faith, your education, dreams, a worthy cause? Remember,” he concluded, “put the

big rocks in first or you will never get them in.” [Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York, NY, Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp. 88-89)]

VI. CHOOSING BIG ROCKS WELL

In stewarding God’s gift of time, if the big rocks are not in place, we end up filling our time with every little thing – while the big rocks, the most significant ones are squeezed out. Wise people learn to figure out what is water, sand, gravel and, most importantly, a big rock. What are yours?

From the Scriptures we get a pretty good sense of what the big rocks are. “Be still and know that I am God,” says the Psalmist. Is there enough – or even any – quiet and stillness in your life for the big rock that is God?

“Husbands, love your wives, wives honor your husbands, parents, bring your children up in the ways of the Lord.” [Ephesians 5-6] Is there time enough to be truly present and engaged with the big rock that is family?

From Jesus we learn that the biggest of all rocks are love of God and love of our neighbors. Where are those rocks in your jar? And what do they look like – after all, love wears different faces in different places.

The prophet Micah talks about the big rocks this way – “What does the Lord require of you – these things – to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.” Is there time for the big rock of doing justice and mercy?

If we rarely spend real time together as spouses or partners or friends, if our relationships with our children are hello and good-bye ones, if we have no time for Scripture or prayer – if we cannot remember the last time we took something on at church, then we are probably in need of looking a bit more closely at our lives. Our calendars tell the real story – they are theological documents that reveal to us what we truly value, they expose the priorities that really guide our lives.

Now, sermons like these can elicit groans because what we generally hear being said is: “you are a bad person if you don’t squeeze two more really important things in on top of the jammed calendar I am scolding you about!” But that is not the point at all. The preacher of today’s text was writing to a people that – just like us – apparently needed a little help with time management. But not so they could do more: rather so they could do what matters.

You see, once we’ve gotten the big things in place, we quickly figure out that there isn’t time for everything, but there **is** time for what is important. And when we figure out what is important, we almost always end up doing less – because we have clarity about what matters and what does not. The lesser things will **not** all fit in the jar. And when we let them go, we discover we didn’t really need them after all.

As we step into this new year church year, in a world of extraordinary overchoice, I invite you to ponder the big rocks in your heart, the building blocks of a genuinely good life. Is there too much gravel and sand in your jar? Perhaps some clutter in your calendar that, as you discern God’s time, really needs to go? Are there some big rocks that you long to value that have never made their way into your jar? As the ancient preacher said, “For everything, there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven.” Homecoming Sunday marks the beginning of a new season, a new time zone. Wise people learn to figure out what time it is. Let us learn, not to read the clock, but rather, to tell the time.

Amen and amen.