



WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
JULY 26, 2026 /9TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15;
1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28, SELECTED VERSES
"HOLD FAST TO WHAT IS GOOD"
REV. DR. CHRISTINE CHAKOIAN

I. FIRST LESSON:

*"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;
A time to tear, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time for war, and a time for peace.*

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given everyone to be busy with. He 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.

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by."

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

II. SECOND LESSON:

Our second lesson comes from Paul's earliest letter to the Thessalonians – indeed, the earliest manuscript of the New Testament, likely written around 50AD. Most of this brief letter is evidence of Paul's deep love for this church he founded – a church that, like all congregations, faced challenges as they tried to figure out what really mattered. Paul's words in this last chapter is his farewell charge to his beloved community.

“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ... For God has destined us not for wrath, but for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

But I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you; ... esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good

And, beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ... And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

– 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28, selected verses

III. HOLD FAST TO WHAT IS GOOD

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” And what a season our years together have been!

In this last month of endings, I've been flooded with memories of our beginnings in August 2019. It was a turning point for me - I was so eager to return to parish ministry after my time serving at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Don't get me wrong - I loved PTS! Getting to read all the professors' books and articles, and translate their importance to our donors.

But I missed being a *pastor* – the sacred privilege of walking with people in times of joy and sorrow, doubt and faith. *And* I was so excited to serve a church where, as a former pastor here liked to say, I didn't need to park my brain at the door.

I was also inspired by your creative stewardship of this property in the partnership with Belmont Village! So much thoughtful work had gone into this agreement, I was blown away. It felt like such a privilege to be called to shepherd this church as the building project was going to unfold.

And, not incidentally, I was so happy to live in the same place with my husband after two years in our commuter-marriage. For *both* of us to find outstanding matches for our careers in the same city - it was a Godsend!

And *then*? How quickly it turned into a very different season! In March of 2020, COVID hit – and everything changed.

Our households were all affected, including ours. Instead of a commuter marriage, John and I went to being stuck in the same house 24/7, LOL!

And our church was deeply impacted. Instead of finalizing architectural drawings and preparing for ground-breaking, we began new, unexpected ventures - like meeting over Zoom, running drive-by food-bank collections, and ordaining deacons and elders in the parking lot, using a feather duster when we couldn't do the laying on of hands – remember this?

And my ministry shifted completely. Instead of preaching from this pulpit and warmly greeting at the door, I recorded sermons from my dining room to a congregation that I barely knew. Instead of pastoral visits to the sick and grieving? I will never forget: it was just two weeks after COVID hit when I donned a mask, gown, and gloves to pray with our beloved organist Namhee Han at the hospital after her stroke ... and again as she took her last breath. It was a heartbreaking time in that tender season. I couldn't even tell you all about our tragic loss except by phone or email.

“For everything there is a season” But some seasons we could never have imagined – and we’ve been through many together. Not only COVID-19, but Mark Jones’ ordination – and then, just four months later, his assault five years ago today, attacked by an unhoused man he was trying to help ... so many staff departures: Pastor Matt, Janelle, Sophie, Gretchen, and then Jessica ... external unrest, including George Floyd, the assault on the capital, Hamas’ attack and its brutal aftermath, and now, the war with Iran ... our local tragedies – the fires last year in the Pacific Palisades and Altadena ... and so much more.

Yet there were signs of light to celebrate as well - so many signs of hope: Jane and Stephan getting married here in worship when we finally returned from COVID ... extraordinary concerts, like the John Williams’ West coast premiere of “Gloria,” and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Requiem” ... treasured baptisms, like Isabelle’s today, and celebrations of the lives of our beloved ones departed, and the promise of the resurrection ... study groups and vespers services, vacation Bible School and the women’s retreat, softball games and Monday Nighters ... welcoming our new staff members: Pastor Paula and Marin, Linda and Laurel, Bri at the Preschool, and the Rev. Dr. Michael Morgan, whom you elected as your next Pastor/Head of Staff.

And through it all, God was with us. Because the Lord is always with us. And the Lord is with us still.

Isn’t that what Pastor Mike shared last week in his sermon? The Scripture he chose was the road to Emmaus – after Jesus’ crucifixion, when the risen Lord appeared to his disciples, and walked alongside them. Even when they did not recognize him, Jesus stuck with them ... he listened to them, encouraged them, and, *without judgment*, opened their eyes to his presence. Jesus was with them, even – especially – in their season of grief and doubt. That is God’s promise to us in every season of our lives.

It’s that same promise Paul shares with his beloved church in Thessalonica. It wasn’t an easy time for them – far from it! It was a season of anxiety as they faced internal tensions and external fears.

Yet Paul urges them to trust in the presence of the Lord, and in that trust, to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing,” and, in all things, to “hold fast to what is good.”

Of all of Paul’s last words of wisdom to his beloved community –

- to encourage one another
- to respect those who labor among you, and esteem them very highly in love
- to help the weak
- to rejoice always
- to pray without ceasing

In all of Paul’s loving advice, “Hold fast to what is good” has a deep and special place in my heart. My late, beloved mentor, John Buchanan, ended every worship service with these words: “Hold to the good.” I can still hear his voice. And when he retired from his service at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, he focused on that message in his farewell sermon.

“Hold to the good,” he said.

“‘Hold to the good,’ because God’s love as we know it in Jesus Christ is always inspiring and enabling the good to happen in this world and because you and I are called by God to live out that love by doing good, promoting good, advocating for and voting for and giving our resources for and living for ‘the good’ in the world.”

What is “the good”? Not rituals and purity, or the idols of tradition. Instead, John said in his sermon, the prophets make it obvious what God desires: “True religion has everything in the world to do with goodness, personal good, societal goodness, economic and political and social goodness.” How do we know? John pointed to the prophet Micah, who “with absolute clarity ... says, ‘He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Micah 6:8).”ⁱ

This verse is the foundation of this church's calling – the focus of the good you seek to do.

There is so very much I love about this congregation, and will always cherish. I love your intellectual approach to faith – that questions and debate are gifts, not burdens. I love your deep commitment - so many of you offering your time, your talents, your treasure. I love, love, love the music, that lifts our spirits so profoundly every Sunday.

But above all? Above all I love that your faith is so deeply rooted in holding to the good.

To the good that God desires in pursuit of justice.

To the good that God encourages us to share in kindness, more than judgment.

To the good that God delights in – your humility in faith, knowing that you will never reach perfection in this lifetime, and yet always, always, there is room to grow and change, to have your eyes opened along the road of faith.

There is so much good here. So in the ancient words of the Talmud, I urge you:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Do justly, now.

Love mercy, now.

Walk humbly, now.

You are not obligated to complete the work.

But neither are you free to abandon it.

Hold to the good, beloved. Hold to the good in every season. Hold to the good in this time, and in all the days ahead – for the Lord is with us still, just as the Lord has been all along the way of our journey. Amen.

ⁱ John M. Buchanan, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2012/012912.html>