

I. Advanced Organizer

A. This morning, we're reflecting a bit on seasons: the seasons we experience, not simply as the calendar advances each year, but the seasons we experience as we move through life.

1. Now as Californians, I'd argue that sometimes for us **our experience of seasonality is not as potent as it might be in other parts of the world**. I grew up in Southern California where, climate-wise we pretty much noticed two seasons of the year: **fire season and not-fire season**. Other than that, going outside, I didn't observe things changing much between July and December.
2. But then I went to college in Chicago and ended up **spending about 20 years in the midwest**. And I developed in that time, a sensitivity to the changes that came regularly. You got accustomed to sensing that first snap of cool breeze in late September or early October that told you autumn was arriving, and the leaves on the trees would soon start to turn in color. A couple months later you sensed the deepening chill and pondered which magical day things would move from cold wind and rain to the romantic dusting of the season's first snowfall. By February, the snow was long past feeling romantic and magical. You found yourself cursing it as you dug your car out for the third time that week, and you wondered how long it might be before you can enjoy being outside without feeling the grip of frostbite. However, sure enough, just weeks later, you'd find yourself tromping through mud as the banks of snow began to thaw, and noticing the first buds on the trees starting to form, a sign that the long winter was passing and new life was coming forth once again.

II. When we look at our Sacred texts, we see that the place in Scripture that mostly clearly reflects on this truth that life is seasonal is found in an obscure little book, a book in the Hebrew Bible known as Ecclesiastes.

A. The book is written by an unknown spiritual guide who is only referred to in the book as "the teacher". This teacher lived in the later years in Israel's history, likely **the last few centuries before Jesus**. The teacher is clearly a philosopher, and his writings in Ecclesiastes reflect this. He writes to his audience about the nature of life itself, and he holds no punches in describing how frustrating the endeavors of it can be.

B. Eugene Peterson's translation of the text called the Message, captures the frustration well in the first verses of the book.

1. Smoke, nothing but smoke.

***There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke.
What's there to show for a lifetime of work,
a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?
One generation goes its way, the next one arrives,
but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth.
The sun comes up and the sun goes down,
then does it again, and again—the same old round.
...There's nothing new on this earth.
Year after year it's the same old thing.
Does someone call out, "Hey, this is new"?
Don't get excited—it's the same old story.
Nobody remembers what happened yesterday.
And the things that will happen tomorrow?
Nobody'll remember them either.
Don't count on being remembered. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11)***

2. So that's fun. This guy is definitely the most popular person at a dinner party, right? This teacher seems like he has some kind of depressing lessons to communicate.
3. Again and again, in the Hebrew the teacher uses this word "hebel" to talk about the nature of life. We see it here in the first sentences; "*Hebel*", nothing but "*hebel*". The word is often translated something like "vanity" or "meaninglessness", but I think the translation I read you captures it better, choosing "smoke". **Scholars say the word "*hebel*" literally means something like vapor.** It's ephemeral. It's transitory. The author isn't necessarily saying all things are devoid of meaning, but he's clearly frustrated with the illusive nature of life which is visible and then disappears, like vapor. Like smoke.
4. **The teacher describes a few different things he has focused his attention on, eventually concluding that all of them are like vapor, all are merely *hebel*.** He talk about the quest for human knowledge: eventually *hebel*. He described the *hebel* of work - putting labor into something only to see it vanish. Even the pursuit of pleasure he finds to be *hebel*. And this leads the teacher to an interesting observation. He seems to move from a place of despair about this illusive understanding of life's purpose, to an acceptance that brings a kind of deeper satisfaction. It is the insight of hard-won wisdom. And this brings us to the reflection on seasons. Reading again from the Message:
 5. ***There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth:
A right time for birth and another for death,
A right time to plant and another to reap,
A right time to kill and another to heal,
A right time to destroy and another to construct,
A right time to cry and another to laugh,
A right time to lament and another to cheer,
A right time to make love and another to abstain,
A right time to embrace and another to part,
A right time to search and another to count your losses,
A right time to hold on and another to let go,
A right time to rip out and another to mend,
A right time to shut up and another to speak up,
A right time to love and another to hate,
A right time to wage war and another to make peace.***

But in the end, does it really make a difference what anyone does? I've had a good look at what God has given us to do—busywork, mostly. True, God made everything beautiful in itself and in its time—but he's left us in the dark, so we can never know what God is up to, whether he's coming or going. I've decided that there's nothing better to do than go ahead and have a good time and get the most we can out of life. That's it—eat, drink, and make the most of your job. It's God's gift.

I've also concluded that whatever God does, that's the way it's going to be, always. No addition, no subtraction. God's done it and that's it. That's so we'll quit asking questions and simply worship in holy fear.

Whatever was, is.

Whatever will be, is.

That's how it always is with God.

6. So the teacher seems to have moved past their wrestling with *hebel*. He seems to have made peace with it in a sense. Yes, life is vapor. It's transitory. It's seasonal, even as we long for something eternal, something lasting and meaningful. Perhaps that is our closest understanding of the Divine - our longing for lasting meaning, our longing for something beyond the here and now connects us with God.
7. But as long as we are finite, mortal humans, we can never grasp that eternal nature. We can only appreciate that it is beyond us, even as it is revealed in some illusory way to us in all of the different seasons of life. That is why all of these seasons, all of these times matter. **They all belong.** They are all a part of a bigger story, a truer reality, a heart at the center of the universe we call God. All of our little struggles and quests for significance are part of this bigger reality. And we can spend our life chasing the wind, or we can try to let go a bit and notice the Divine with us in each season along the way.
8. In my life I recognize that at times I have found myself in seasons where things felt free and relatively smooth, and seasons where everything has seemed challenging. But each of these have played an important role in shaping me, shaping my relationships, shaping my connection to God. All of them have been important parts of my story, even if my understanding of exactly how they fit at times feels like vapor.
9. So why was this teacher interested in his audience grasping this understanding of life as seasonal? Perhaps it has something to do with his setting. Scholars believe this author wrote in the century or two after the people of God had suffered significant trauma, the trauma of the exile, and now they were living in relative peace and prosperity. The wisdom, the insight, that can come from seasons of disruption, even pain - these are in the rear view mirror. And it seems our teacher wants his audience to retain the lessons they'd learned in the exile about what really mattered.
10. I think we are passing ourselves into a season where it **might feel tempting to try and forget all that has been painfully and powerfully revealed in the last year.** Perhaps we want to just resume all of the projects we had to put on pause fifteen months ago. Perhaps we want as quickly as possible to turn the page on the season we've just been in and leave that whole thing behind, hopefully never to return again. To us, I think the teacher of Ecclesiastes would say "wait". Don't rush to amnesia. Don't throw yourself into trying to build your little empire again, or satiate yourself with pleasure, or amass all the human knowledge needed to change the world. Remember, in the end, all of that is ultimately vapor. This last year of disruption has reminded us of that. Life, with its seasons, its ups and downs, its losses and its gifts reminds us of that. So pay attention to the seasons in your own life - literal and metaphorical. And hold onto the truth each season has taught you. Ponder where the Divine has been present in each time. Hold these in your heart, even as you welcome the next season, knowing all of it belongs. All of it is held by the divine.
11. **We are in a sacred moment of transition. I think these transition moments are sacred because they help make the** change of seasons more apparent to us. Like a first snowfall, these transition moments ask us to notice the truth that is always with us - things inevitably change, even as in another sense "there is nothing new under the sun". This change of season need not be feared. Change is part of the Divine reality. As Octavia Butler said, "All that you touch you Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God Is Change.". We are invited, like the teacher, to move from frustration to acceptance, even to peace. We can remember that we are not in control. We

never were and we never were meant to be. There's something freeing in that truth. As the author says:

12. *Whatever was, is.*

Whatever will be, is.

That's how it always is with God. Amen.