

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;

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

<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;

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

<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

<sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

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

<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;

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

<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;

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

<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

<sup>9</sup> What gain have the workers from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

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## Take Pleasure in Your Toil

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

So, here we are. At the beginning of a new year, a new century, a new thousand year block. Even if you're a purist who knows the millennium really begins a year from now, at 2001, even if you are such a purist, there is something singular about turning the calendar to 2000. Those zeroes give it a fresh look, maybe suggest a fresh start.

And wouldn't that be nice? Life has a way of getting complicated. Things happen. Things get said. Things get done. History builds up. The French don't like Americans. The Muslims don't trust the Jews. An alcoholic parent has put the family through one too many binges. An affair has undermined the trust in a once solid marriage. The interlocking baggage of the past is a heavy yoke. And wouldn't it be nice to just set it all aside? Wouldn't it be nice to set it all aside and start over with a clean slate, with no complications?

And it seems possible, with the calendar set with all those zeroes. A fresh start seems possible.

Partly it seems possible, just as it does any New Year, partly it seems possible just because the beginning of the year is a good time for a new beginning. If a New Year is good, a new millennium must be really good.

Partly a new beginning seems possible because we are members of a faith that is all about new beginnings, new beginnings made out of bad endings. The whole story of Jesus finds its power in the overcoming of an ending bad on so many counts. Jesus dies on the cross, but the resurrection reverses defeat. Jesus' disciples get it all wrong, but ultimately they start over and start the church. The Apostle Paul begins as an anti-Christian terrorist and becomes perhaps the most visible leader of the early church. Christianity meets with persecution in the empire, but eventually becomes the empire's sanctioned religion. And most of all, Jesus' death and resurrection are interpreted to mean that in him all of us can be made new. So, new millennium or not, we are a people receptive to new beginnings, because our faith promise us nothing less.

And partly a new beginning, an uncomplicated re-start seems possible because we are heirs to an era of science and logic which tells us that even the most

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apparently complicated and mysterious things actually make relatively simple and very certain sense.

I realize that you may just now be wondering what in the world science and logic have to do with new beginnings, but stay with me for a moment. Science tends to seek elegant and simple explanations. The Ptolemains believed the universe centered around the earth. However, it took certain very complicated rationalizations to explain certain observations. Copernicus made the explanations much less messy by postulating that the sun was the center of the solar system. Copernicus' theories were modified by first Kepler, then Galileo, and then Newton. And each time the modification simplified previous explanations. Even Einstein's theory of relativity was meant to more simply and coherently describe the universe. Through science we have come to believe that there is just one right answer, and that that answer is usually the most simple answer that explains the facts.

Similarly, logic says there are no grey areas, no contradictions. One of the most fundamental building blocks of modern logic is the simple assertion that a sentence cannot be both true and false. Either I have thirty-five cents in my pocket or I don't. Either I am just now standing here in the pulpit or I am not. Either you are just now sitting in your pew or you are not. It seems perfectly obvious to all of us, I imagine, that one part or the other of each of these sentences is true, but not both parts.

And what does all this have to do with our belief in the possibility of new beginnings? Just this. If everything can be explained, if the best explanations are the simplest, and if there are no legitimate contradictions, then we ought to be able clean the slate, figure out what the unambiguous truth is and get about doing it. Whether we are talking about family life or international relations, science and logic suggest that we should be able to figure out what is right, we should all be able to agree to it, and we should be able to ride happily ever after into the sunset of happy accord.

So, the year stands propitiously at 2000, our faith promises new beginnings if it promises anything at all, and science and logic tell us everything can be clear and relatively uncomplicated if we but get the theories right. It sounds like a perfect time to put the world, and our own lives aright. As the quit smoking ads have been saying lately, there won't be a better date for another thousand years.

In many ways I am persuaded by the argument. What a good moment it is to set aside old conflicts that struggle deep in a quick-sand of mutual and willful misunderstanding and misrepresentation. What a good time it is to unburden ourselves from tired ways of thinking and being that weigh us down and make us walk all our days in a slumber. What a good time it is to face some of the demons which bedevil us and shake ourselves free of them. What a good time it is to make some important changes we have been putting off. What an opportunity it is!

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I worry, though, that we may be fooled by thinking such new beginnings are as simple as they seem, or as simple as our point of view about the world would like us to believe they should be.

The writer of Ecclesiastes wants to give us a slightly more complex picture of things, a more complicated and nuanced reality. Ecclesiastes describes a world of coexisting opposites. Unlike the logician who says that either one thing or the other must be true, Ecclesiastes says that opposing postures are profoundly reasonable. “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.” This famous passage from Ecclesiastes starts with this rich set of paradoxes for a reason deeply relevant to our discussion this morning.

Ecclesiastes understands that God has “put a sense of past and future into our minds.” The Hebrew is difficult to translate perfectly here. But what it is trying to say is that we have a capacity for knowledge, remember the Garden of Eden. We have a capacity for knowledge, stolen, perhaps from the tree in the garden. We have a capacity for knowledge, but that capacity fools us into believing we can know and control all things. Ecclesiastes wants us to grasp that while we may know many things, the world is filled with paradox. The world is not so simple as we might wish – there are times for weeping and times for laughing, times for mourning and times for dancing, and we don’t control or predict when one will be appropriate over the other. And there are times, like at the funeral of a loved one, when weeping and laughing may coexist, may be woven together into one experience, a bitter-sweet tapestry of true love and remembrance.

Ecclesiastes tells us of this rich and complex world, at least in part, as a warning against our haughtiness. Making new beginnings is a good thing. It is also a hard thing. Change is very difficult and often painful. I don’t suppose any of us instinctively likes it much. There’s the joke – How many church members does it take to change a light bulb? Change? Change? – New beginnings are good, but they are hard, and Ecclesiastes wants us to know that our new beginnings will fall flat if we think they will be easy, if we are unprepared for their difficulty, or if we think we can predict how they will all unfold.

But Ecclesiastes is not suggesting inaction and repose. Ecclesiastes is not telling us to sit on the sidelines. Ecclesiastes is clear that God has given us work to do, new beginnings to make, projects to take up. But Ecclesiastes is also telling us that it will be a winding road on which one day it will be a time to tear and another it will be a time to sew. Ecclesiastes wants us to be prepared that life takes various contours and not to get discouraged.

Furthermore, Ecclesiastes suggests that a major part of the project of life is recognizing when one thing is appropriate over its opposite, even though its opposite was appropriate yesterday. Even in life lived right, one day war is

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appropriate and another day peace is. It's a lot easier to believe that it's always right to fight or that it never is. It's a lot harder to discern when one is right one day and the other another day. By one commentator Winston Churchill was voted the most influential man of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why? Because at a very dark moment in history one nation, and one man at its helm dared to say it was a time for war. What might the world today look like had Britain not opposed Hitler's Third Reich? But a quarter of a century later Martin Luther King, Jr. lost much of his fragile national support because he dared to say it was time for peace in Viet Nam. There is a time for war and a time for peace, and like all other aspects of life, it is required of us not only to see that both are true, but to learn to discern when one or the other is. This is part of the work that God has given us to do: to accept and make discernment in a complicated world.

So, new beginnings are more daunting, perhaps, than we would have thought. Things aren't simple. We have to grapple with the uncertainty of paradox. And yet, we are surely to accept the challenge and seek always to begin anew.

I suppose there are at least two ways to read the situation. The first is to read it as a warning only. Ecclesiastes, then, warns us that things are complex and we can never get anything absolutely right, because there is no absolutely right to get. Left there, it may not seem worth the bother. But Ecclesiastes goes on to suggest that we can, day by day, event by event, discern the season. Ecclesiastes goes on to say even more, though. For Ecclesiastes encourages us to take up our work, our work of new beginnings, in earnest, but then also know that the result is in some large measure in God's hands.

You will have to forgive me if I make an analogy to golf. As you see, in the new millennium I have not given up my old fixation. But golf is a hard game. There are too many parts all moving at once, all in the effort to hit a very small ball a long way with accuracy. And the more one stands over the ball, concentrating on the ball and the target, tensing the muscles, and obsessing about getting it right, the more the result is bound to be elusive. On the other hand, the game does require enormous concentration. Some have called what it requires alert indifference. It requires careful attention without caring too much about the outcome.

In the end it's the only way to enjoy the game and keep your clubs from being wrapped around a tree. Life, too, requires a similar alert indifference. It requires taking it ever so seriously and making real new beginnings because life is such a precious opportunity to do so. It also requires letting go of any stranglehold on how we want it to go with a shrug of the shoulders and saying, It's only life. Both perspectives have to go together or it doesn't work.

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In the end, if we pull it off, then we realize God's wish for us. Ecclesiastes says it this way: "[I]t is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil." Thanks be to God. Amen.

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