

“Blessings in the Seasons of the Year”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Part of the “Blessings” Worship Series
Edina Morningside Community Church; September 3, 2017

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11a

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 to everyone to be busy with.

He has made everything suitable for its time....

Labor Day weekend carries bittersweet emotional significance. This weekend marks the close of official “summer” in our culture. We’re accustomed after Labor Day to look for leaves changing, temperatures dropping, and farmers harvesting. Though some schools have already started fall classes, this time still marks the customary divide between summer and school. For those fortunate enough to have the time and money, now is the last best chance to enjoy luxurious summer vacation before the industrious frenzy of fall activities sets in. Even those of us still in town this weekend enjoy time to rest and catch our breath, but the seasons are changing and the calendar is as well. Labor Day specifically honors and prepares for the season of work, by pausing work for an extra day in many—though not all—positions.

The balance here between a time for work and a time for play, plus the transition between summer and fall, makes this a great weekend to read Ecclesiastes 3. Tradition suggests that King Solomon wrote this wisdom book in his final years, reflecting on the activities of his life, and the presence of God in them. In chapter three he suggests that meaning emerges from recognizing the natural balance of all life. Everything has its proper season, even that which is entirely opposite—one state from another.

In the past, I’ve only preached on this Bible passage at funerals and farewells. I’ve read it at the funerals of several salt-of-the-earth veterans and truckers. Pastor Rosemary used Ecclesiastes 3 when retiring from EMC in 2015. This text is used in such hinge seasons when the future will be unlike the past. It acknowledges transition from one time to another, and trusts God with change when “the way things are” no longer suits the times we are in. I believe Edina Morningside Church is in such a hinge season now, and it’s much more than just Labor Day weekend. Let me explain, with a bit of Minnesota lake culture.

Yesterday I was up north with Javen’s family in Walker, Minnesota. We were a big group celebrating his sister Briana’s birthday, more than a half dozen pontoons and cruisers crisscrossing the western part of Leech Lake then pulling up on a wide sandy beach called Agency Bay. After several hours bobbing around in waist-deep waters, it became time to head home. Almost twenty people fanned out and returned to their boats, but they couldn’t all leave at the same time. Each had to be untied from the others, and get the right passengers onboard. The boat Javen and I were on was delayed because we stayed back to hug goodbye one last person who was busy helping push boats off the sandy lake bottom. Only when he took a break and hugged us, only when we’d gotten aboard the right boat, only when it was untied and pointed in the right direction—only *then* could we rev the engines, get the bow out of the water on plane, and splash through the waves on our way to the dock.

For the past four months, Edina Morningside Church has been trying to get the right people on the boat. Last May we welcomed new leadership for most of our ministry teams, and a new round of culture shifts and learning curves on each of them. That month we also had two staff members depart through retirement or resignation, while a third took a welcome leave of absence for writing and restoration. This summer we have tested temporary arrangements and have now finally welcomed the next full set of preschool staff. It's felt like we've been idling these past four months (not a bad way to spend the summer, if I'm honest) but now at last we're all onboard and ready to go!

But where are we headed next? Where does the bow point? To a safe-harbor destination, or the adventure of open seas? If "to everything there is a season", what season is it for us now? Is it a time to plant, or to pluck up that which was planted? A time to embrace, or to refrain from embracing? The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with." What is our business, the work to which we're called?

Some things we know. We are about to begin a new season of growth and learning, when Preschool and faith formation activities resume with Rally Sunday. We know some of the milestones in the coming months: Christmas and Easter worship, Women's Fellowship meals and community programs, remodeling work gathering steam for the entrance and narthex.

But some things about the season ahead are unknown. How will we be called upon to offer bold Christian witness for "the least of these" in the face of wealthy-take-all economic division? Will we respond to the call of the gospel and this cultural moment to learn more about white privilege and then to renounce it? Can we encounter ourselves in the ancient human stories written in Scripture, hear Jesus confronting the ways of the world and call us another way, then enlist with the Holy Spirit to act with righteousness for God's beloved world? I have some sense of what's possible in the months ahead, but discerning what season it is will only come best from listening for the Spirit's guidance together, in community.

It's like that game I played in childhood: "What time is it, Mr. Fox?" A whole group of children asks that question together, and whatever time the one child (the fox) says, that's how many steps they all move. "What time is it, Mr. Fox?" "5 o'clock!", they take five steps forward, and the question comes again: "What time is it, Mr. Fox?". The game doesn't work if the question isn't asked in unison, leaving space and silence to listen for the reply. That's how it is with the seasons as well. We repeatedly ask the time, listen to hear correctly, then move accordingly.

So, what time is it, EMC? Is it time to welcome the child-of-God into our house, no matter their country of origin? Is it time to denounce the identity politics of those Christians who say that only heterosexual white people can be faithful followers of Jesus? Is it time to let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty flowing stream? Is it time for compassion that not only bandages a wound but also asks why the wound keeps appearing? Is it time to organize ourselves and more fully care for lonely seniors, who despair in isolation near the end of life? Is it time to make this house of God resound with songs of praise new AND old? Is it time to heed the calls of police officers and bereaved parents, lobbying for mental health care to be more readily available than assault rifles? Is it time to say no to the absurd pace of children's activities, so they may say yes to childhood once again? Is it time to share the love of Christ with such joy that it breaks through clouds of hostility and stranger-danger?

I cannot know the time—these or any others—all by myself. We are called *together* to ask the question, listen for God's call, and act accordingly. We are indeed at a hinge point as the church here and the church universal. After a summertime of reorganization and new "all aboard"s, let this Labor Day be a chance to rest, listen and consider. Because to everything there is a season, and our next one is fast approaching. It's time! Amen.