

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

For Everything There is a Season 2

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Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 3-4

Today we continue our series on There is a Season for Everything with verses 3 and 4, both of which feel particularly relevant for the challenges we are facing today.

A time to break down

If ever there was a year in recent memory to embody a time to break down, 2020 seems to be it. From the pandemic of COVID-19 to protests in the streets, we are living through times that one friend called, “history being made,” and it is only August. I am concerned that those who are likely to be without jobs for the foreseeable future are now at high risk of becoming homeless, and small business are closing every day. Parents are making calls about their children’s health and education for the coming school year, as teachers and staff worry about gathering in person while COVID is still spreading in our communities. Here at Faith Presbyterian, we’ve experienced the death of our beloved Pastor Virginia, right at the start of the shutdown, and continue to grieve our loss of her.

When things start to swirl in what seems to be chaos, it is tempting to give into anxiety and think that everything is lost. And I think we are called to see bigger than that. Is there plenty to be concerned about in our country and world today? Of course, there is, and I pray that sensible, centered folks are involved in helping to solve those problems. But there is a reality beyond worrying about things breaking down, and it is this: sometimes to build something new, the old has to break down.

Breaking Down to Build Up

In the natural world, things have to break down for new things to grow. The gardeners among us know it well. Recently I visited a friend who has an extensive vegetable garden in her backyard, and as we toured it, she told me all the things that she had cleared out from the last year so that new things could grow in their place.

At the same time though, some things are breaking down that can have catastrophic impacts. Families that are being evicted because no one has a job can have lasting consequences for children who become homeless. Those who are sick and can’t afford medical care may find that they can no longer work. Our homeless are even more

stressed today because of all the disruptions. We have to know the difference between these kinds of situations.

Jesus knew this. He preached about the new kingdom of God where all had enough and God's mercy for everyone. He used metaphors to explain how things were going to be pretty different and required people to see differently what is around them. For example, Jesus talked about "New wine" which to Jesus was the inbreaking news of the kingdom of God. He talked about new wine (that is, wine that needed to be fermented), and how you can't put new wine into old wineskins. Why was that? Well, wineskins were made of goatskins and as they aged, the leather became hard and unable to expand. If new wine was put in them, the leather would burst because of the bubbles created by fermentation.

At the same time, he also talked about healing those in trouble and backed that up by healing them himself. As Jesus worked to explain and model the new kingdom of God, he also got busy helping those who needed the help by feeding folks, casting out demons, healing people, and returning them to their communities. Looking forward did not mean ignoring the suffering before him.

Helping Now

So I wonder as we observe the breaking down in our world, two things:

- how we can patiently observe what is happening to also find what God is doing among us to build up something new
- how can we help those who are less fortunate than we are during this time

Seeing more clearly: This spring we have been aware more than ever that certain segments of our population are unfairly targeted by some law enforcement because of the way they look. The protests that were ignited after the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer gave us all pause and made some of us wonder: What can I do?

The first thing we can do about this and other things that are breaking down is to take notice. I will confess that there are times when the world's suffering can feel like a bombardment, and I flee from pain that I don't know how to fix. It doesn't mean that I don't want to help, but the impotence I confront in myself is in a sense false. Those who suffer, those who seek redress for wrongs most of all want my companionship.

