

Living in Finite Time

For Everything There is a Season 5

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

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Ecclesiastes 9: 1-10

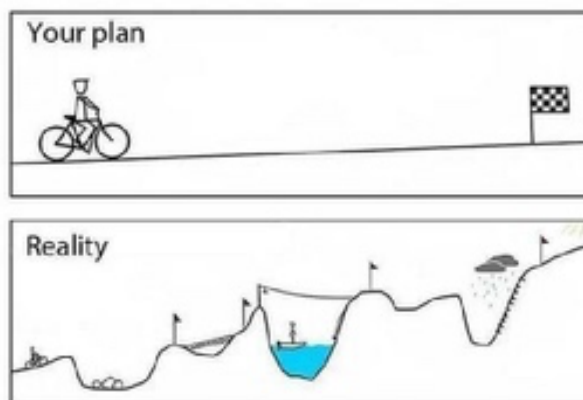
Introduction

A few years ago, my cousin Marie was in the middle of Santa Rosa, a city about 50 miles north of San Francisco, with the power out, wondering whether she should evacuate her house because the night before, the Tubbs fire had torn through north of her, destroying hundreds of homes in a matter of hours and causing her daughter's family to flee in the middle of the night.

She admitted that she was having trouble calming down in the middle of all the upsetting news and uncertainty, and I texted her back "Time to practice that yoga breathing," to which she replied, "But not outside in the smoke." That's advice that she had to follow this week as well, as fires burn throughout the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

There is much uncertainty about tomorrow, next week, next month, let alone planning for next year. We're in the beginning/middle of the pandemic, there's a lot of polarized thinking in our families and communities, and many of our usual ways of dealing with stress are still not safe to use.

Uncertainty is one of those things can make us all a bit (or more) neurotic, and I think sometimes we play hard in planning dreams where everything goes as planned, right. But this cartoon sums up what we really experience:



If this chart ever described a year, it certainly feels like 2020. We are in the thick of unexpected terrain. It's the old adage: want to make God laugh? Tell her your plans!

Over the past few weeks we have examined some of the lessons embedded in Ecclesiastes 3, which pairs opposites in its theme of "a time to." The times will vary in our lives, and in this season that we are living in, we are newly challenged in ways that we haven't had to deal with in about a century, the time of the Spanish Flu pandemic.

Our scripture today has a different emphasis than those of chapter 3 – instead of saying there is a time for every matter under heaven, the scripture leans into another theme, that our lives are finite, and we need to remember that the same fate awaits us all – the experience of death. It invites us to see in the passing of our days times to enjoy life "drink your wine with a merry heart" as well as "whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might."

At the same time, I was reviewing some material by Margaret Wheatley, someone who helps individuals and groups to look at their lives and futures, and a couple of questions popped out at me:

Do you have as much time to think as you did a year ago?

When was the last time you spent time reflecting on something important to you?

I think our answers vary on these questions – because the pandemic has altered our lives in many different ways. Our families with school-age children are burdened more these days with guiding their children through school. They barely have time to get things done each day and no time for reflection. Others in our community are isolated from family and friends and find themselves with more time than is helpful. Some of us continue working in altered ways and thrown out of our usual routines.

So as I look at Wheatley's questions, I realize – for some of us, these may be helpful, while for others, they are questions for another day, another time.

Perhaps a broader answer is to follow the advice of our preacher/teacher of Ecclesiastes and to embrace a spirituality of "now."

Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician who works with those going through severe illnesses and accidents, and she observes that those who do best "have found a sort of willingness to show up for whatever life may offer and meet with it rather than wishing to edit and change the inevitable." One patient told her "When you are walking on thin ice, you might as well dance."

So, in these times of curtailments of some of our usual ways, perhaps the way forward is to become less attached to particular ways of living so that we can more deeply experience and participate in life.

I'm reminded of a dear family friend, Sandy, who was diagnosed with ovarian cancer – and late stage. She was quite ill, and had to quickly give up working and focus on her own health. It was a really hard time for her sisters, mother and father. But Sandy responded to the crisis in an unexpected way. She decided that instead of walling off her life from her family as she had done in previous years, she would invite everyone in on the journey, including her mother, with whom she had had a difficult relationship. For Sandy, there was no miraculous cure for her ovarian cancer, but there was a miracle of new life in her relationship with her mother.

All of us will face crisis and uncertainty in our lives, of that we can almost be assured. People we love will both enter and leave our lives. Both good and bad things will happen to those that we love, and we will have times of great joy and sorrow, in measures that we cannot anticipate.

My prayer continues to be for each of us that we will find the way to choose life in all its fullness, that through slowing down and reflecting on our own, or with one another, through healing ritual and baby steps, through finding how our stories connect to the big story of God and God's people, life will flourish, community will flourish.

Friends, let us live with our whole hearts, full in response to the life given us by God.

Amen.