

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴ I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it.

Matthew 2:1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been

written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people, Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

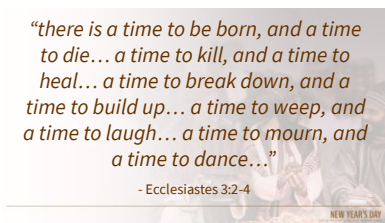


As we gather on this first day of a new year, we do so in a way that I do not think we have previously done. So much has changed these past few years. COVID remains a presence in our world still. Not to minimize its impact, but we’ve kind of gotten used to it, haven’t we? At least to the sickness part. The empty shelves and high prices and no one having enough staff – that still catches me off guard now and then. The power structures of the world have been affected these past three years too. Russia continues to wage war in Ukraine. Our nation, like others, remains divided. Each party is entrenched in their end of the spectrum, pointing angry fingers at the other side. Perhaps you, like me, come to the end of 2022 with a bit of a weight upon you.

The world nor any earthly power has an answer or a solution for any of this that weighs us down. So as we turn to 2023, we are invited to look to the Lord. We are encouraged to covenant with one another and to walk hand in hand with God and with one another as we enter this new year. As we prepare to covenant together, let us pray...

Please turn with me to our Old Testament reading for today, to Ecclesiastes 3. Perhaps these words took you back a few decades and you first heard Peter, Paul, and Mary or maybe later heard the Byrds singing the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn.” Recorded in the mid 60’s, these words echo the content of Ecclesiastes 3. In verse 1 we read, *“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”* In the general sense, this is very true. The world and all that is in it was and is created by God. There is great purpose and meaning to God’s creation. There is complex design to our world and there are amazing processes that govern the functioning of our world. So it makes perfect sense that there are times and seasons for everything.

In verses 2-8 we find quite the list. All of the items on the list come as a pair or a set.



“there is a time to be born, and a time to die... 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...”

- Ecclesiastes 3:2-4

For example, *“there is a time to be born, and a time to die... 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...”* In these and more,

Solomon is unpacking the nature of life. We are born and we die. We weep and we laugh. We mourn and we dance. These are weighty matters.

Solomon's point is that these are things that God makes time for, that God recognizes and wants to be a part of as we experience each of these things in our lives. God wants to be a part of it all.



Our covenant God promises to love and be with us no matter what. God wants and promises and desires to be fully present to us all of the time, in all situations. In verse 9

God includes our working life into this as well. Even our toil is *"suitable for its time"* and it is God's gift to us that we should *"eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."* In each of these experiences – both the good and the bad and even in the mundane – we learn and grow and change. Who and what we are is the cumulative result of our life experiences and our encounters with God and with each other.

In the good experiences, the times when we heal and laugh and love and so on, then we blossom or grow stronger or wiser or more joyful. We understand life or we come to see ourselves in a new way and we move forward with confidence or assurance. And in the sad experiences, such as death and mourning and throwing away and so on, we also learn and grow as we walk together, becoming more connected to God and to one another. For example, when we lose someone we come to understand that part of that person stays with us and becomes a part of who we are and what we have to offer to one another.

So maybe when Solomon states that there is a time for every matter at least part of what the good king is saying is that we matter. When we laugh or when we cry, we matter. When we are silent or when we speak, we matter. When we work, we matter. We matter to the world; we matter to God; we matter to one another. A part of what Solomon is telling us too is that time is a gift. How we use it, what we fill it with, who we share it with – our response to this gift – it matters.

Please turn with me now to Matthew 2 as we look at another gift. In the opening of chapter 2 we learn that wise men from the east have come seeking the new king. Tradition



has it that these wise or scholarly men studied the stars for signs. Tradition also holds that they studied a lot more than stars – including religions for other places. It is also believed that the wise men traveled from Babylon. The Israelites time in captivity would have connected these two cultures. So when the star appeared and the wise men interpreted that it announced the arrival of a new king, they connected into the prophecies found in the Hebrew scriptures and headed out to follow the star, to meet this new king of the Jews. Roughly two years later, they would arrive.

Following the star, they traveled east and ended up in Jerusalem, the capital. Here they began to inquire about where they might find the child, “*born king of the Jews.*” This caught onto Herod’s radar. He was the king, and he had no newborn son. Feigning interest in worshiping this new king, Herod rounded up the religious folk and found out that the child was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem.

The religious leaders informed him, *“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people, Israel.”* He then learned from the wise men what

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- Matthew 2:6 (Micah 5:2)

time the star appeared. With ulterior motives Herod instructs the wise men to return with a full report so that he too can go and “worship” this newborn king. After this encounter, the magi climbed on their camels and high-tailed it out of Jerusalem, beginning the last stage of their journey.



Departing from Jerusalem, the magi continue following the star, eventually arriving just where they were supposed to.

When the star stopped over the house, we read that the magi were *“overwhelmed with joy.”* What a long journey it had been – just about 500 miles. And now they were on the doorstep of meeting this new king. In verse 11 their journey culminates. Traveling from Jerusalem they ride to the front door of a little nondescript house on the edge of this tiny town called Nazareth. They enter the house, see Mary and Jesus, and bow down in worship to this king. Prostrate on the wooden or dirt floor, tired eyes and aching muscles, hearts pounding with joy and excitement, did they know? Did they know that this was the Messiah of the world? Rising up to stare at this toddler, being raised in a poor, working-class family in a small, out-of-the-way village, did they know? Or did they only hope that this was the king that the prophets wrote about?

Something in their hearts and souls told them, “Yes, this is the newborn king.” The magi present to Mary their gifts for Jesus, offering him “*gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*” Imagine the scene. A startled young mother and her child, wise men dressed in fine clothing, presenting gifts of great worth. I’m curious. Do you think they asked to hold the child? And if they did, were they once again overwhelmed with tears of joy?

The wise men exit the small house and mount their camels. They begin the long journey home. Warned in a dream to avoid Herod, they travel a different route for a while, avoiding Jerusalem. These men who we know little about disappear from the story of scripture as they ride off into the night. As they rode away, they did so as changed men. Just as our encounters with tears and laughter or with breaking down or building up change and transform us, so too would have this encounter with the holy changed and transformed these wise men. The magi were changed and transformed because of who they found. In a moment the words of prophesy, the excitement of the journey, the culmination of following the star, they all faded away as they knelt in the presence of the divine. So it is with us when we encounter the presence of the divine.

Because of the wise men and their journey to the Christ child, today is known as “Epiphany Sunday.” Epiphany is a Christian tradition celebrated on January 6th. This event celebrates the manifestation of the Christ to the Gentiles, who came in the form of wise men from the east. Within our understanding of the word “epiphany” is a stumbling upon, a catching of a glimpse, an intuitive revelation into the reality or meaning of something.

An epiphany is often initiated by a commonplace, simple event. An epiphany is not so much a knowing as it is a grasping. It is something that we receive. That's what happened with the wise men. They stumbled into that small house, and they saw and received Jesus as king. In a moment they caught a glimpse of the divine and saw deep into the reality of what this meant to their lives and to the world. That opportunity is ours today too. That is the invitation today.

Just as the wise men gave gifts of great value, today we are invited to give a gift of great worth and value: our lives. There are, of course, many ways that we can commit to our faith. The primary means is by committing our time. In that spirit, today I ask you to covenant with me and with the church to being a part of this community of faith throughout the new year.

As a place to begin our commitment to covenant together throughout 2023, we turn now to the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. Written and first used in worship by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in 1755, these words express a deep commitment to walking faithfully and obediently with the Lord. Wesley used these words for this same purpose as I do today: to invite a congregation into a deeper walk of faith as the new year was about to begin. As you came in today, you received a small card with these words on the front. I invite you to say these words with me as an expression of our communal commitment to faithful living and practice in 2023. The words will be on the screen as well.

Please join me:

"I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing..."

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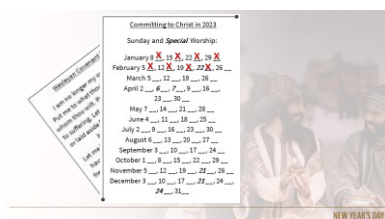
... I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."

- Wesleyan Covenant Prayer

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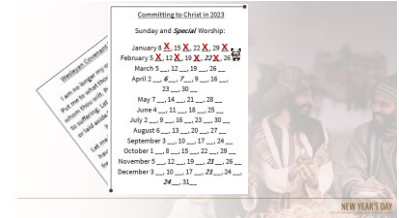
Thank you for committing to a faithful and obedient walk with Christ in 2023. Now, please turn the card over. This is intended as a potential tool to help you track this spiritual discipline. We will worship as a church family almost 60 times in the coming year. Most of the dates represent Sunday morning worship. The bold dates represent gatherings on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and so on.



I hope that you can use this card as a way to see that you are honoring your covenant. However, that being said, we must also acknowledge that there will be times when you go to

visit your new granddaughter Ellie or that you are sick or... Please DO NOT take this to the extreme. There will be Sundays that you miss.

But that is part of the beauty of a covenant. We don't have to be perfect. So don't place a big frowning panda bear on your card when you miss a Sunday. Just recognize and accept this as it is intended – as a tool to help you in your walk of faith.



In Matthew 23, verse 23, Jesus says, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.”* The Pharisees were all about checking the boxes. For these religious leaders, they did things for show – look at me, placing my tithe of herbs on the altar. In much the same way, for some it can be easy to come to church on Sunday morning. That can then just become a box we check. Along the same lines as with the Pharisees, we cannot neglect the "weightier matters" such as *“justice and mercy and faith.”* For us we cannot neglect disciplines such as prayer and personal Bible study.

And for those who winter down south or visit family on a weekend. It does not matter if you are attending Grace or not. Maybe you have a home church in Arizona, or you go to your children's church when you are visiting. Maybe you tune in to Grace online when you are away. All of these would certainly “count” in terms of using this tool.



And now, as we close, please bow your heads and pray with me...

O God, because you have been pleased to give your holy law as the rule of our lives and the way we should walk in your kingdom, we willingly submit ourselves to you, set our shoulder to your burden, and subscribe in all your laws as holy, just, and good.

We solemnly take them, as the rule of our words, thoughts, and actions, promising that though our flesh might contradict and rebel, we will try to order and govern our whole lives according to your direction, and we will not allow ourselves to neglect any of our duties to you. Now, Almighty God, searcher of hearts, you know that we make this covenant with you today without deceit or reservation, asking you, that if you see any flaw or falsehood in us, that you should reveal it to us and help us to get right with you. We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider entering a covenant with Christ, what might you have to give up or add in to commit to a deeper walk of faith this year?
- 2) *Pray*. When or in what circumstances will you most struggle to live obediently and faithfully throughout 2023? Who can you ask for prayer from in these times?
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 3:10-18. Like John did with the crowd, what barrier in your life would John address if he appeared on your doorstep?