I’m going to start off with a bit of a confession this morning. It will give you some insight into where our themes for worship come from and how services and sermons get planned. Frankly, sometimes everything falls into place, and sometimes it doesn’t. Or, at least it doesn’t in the way I’d first imagined.

Back in June or so, or maybe it was in May, it felt like we were really turning a corner in this pandemic. Remember? Finally, we thought. Sighs of relief. We began gradually resuming life—meals with friends, trips to visit family…Some of our kids picked up with summer school activities and classes, a very welcome relief for those who had not faired so well at home with distance learning. We were seeing the light.

So, looking ahead, I envisioned a sermon series based on this familiar passage from Ecclesiastes as a way to ground us spiritually as we entered into what we all thought we surely be a new season. I saw this as a theme that would transition us as we reset our clocks, opened up our calendars, making plans to move on.

At that point, we didn’t know the awful impact that the Delta variant would bring, a bit less so to us here in Southern California, but hitting hard in states across the south of the US and, of course, around the world. As we worship this morning, hospitals in many places are full. The variant is taking a toll on younger folks and children. Our health care workers are still exhausted and teachers and school administrators are trying to sort out what the beginning of the school year is going to look like.

So, we’re hunkering down. Proceeding cautiously. Masking up. Encouraging everyone to mask and to get vaccinated ASAP. Protecting ourselves and one another is still our primary focus and we all need to do everything in our power to stop the variant from spreading and to close gaps where new variants might emerge.

So, preacher, for everything there is a season, says Ecclesiastes in this ages-old meditation on the nature and meaning of life, one of the Wisdom books of Jewish-Christian scripture. For everything, a season. But what season is it, we wonder, in this time of lingering disorientation, fatigue and anxiety, full of questions and unknowns?

How does the wisdom of Ecclesiastes help us sort it out? Well, on the one hand, the juxtaposition of opposites could read as resignation in the face of life’s ‘seasons’: “a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance…”
Seen through one lens, we seem to simply have a listing of our human sense of time’s repetition, put together in something of an either/or, back-and-forth, same-old, same-old, ‘nothing new under the sun’ sort of way, as if a spirit-numbing sense of inevitability is all there is.

Yet still, like the Magi so long ago, we long for new life to be revealed. With them, we still search the night sky for the star that will guide us now, and lead us into greater compassion, clearer purpose, and deeper humility. We seek the wisdom that leads us closer to the heart of God. Grounding for the living of these days. A conviction of the beauty and joy of eternity weaving through our nights and days.

Ah…so listen again to the words of Ecclesiastes. Hear it in a new way. There is a deeper melody for us to hear in this passage. A word of life. A song of joy. Taken as a whole, quilted together, we can see life’s totality and variety as a mosaic of fragments, pieces, experiences, endings and beginnings. The experiences of life are common to all, but lived uniquely by each one of us. God’s creating Spirit guides us in this dance, leads us as we gather the fragments from all the seasons and form them into new holy unity. It is the Spirit of Life that gives us courage to live in the moment, in this season, even as we say ‘Yes’ to God’s gift of purpose and ever-new possibility. Choose life, says God. Choose life.

The Wisdom and life of God is with us through it all, through the tempest, through the storm, in the tumult and the strife. In the darkness and the light. In the night and in the day. In the sorrow and in the joy. It’s all part of life as we experience it—“a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak…” And, as John Wesley said in his last words, as he lay dying, poised to move from this life as we know it into a new season of life fulfilled beyond our imagining, he said: “the best of all: God is with us.”

God is with us, church, in all the seasons of our lives and now, this year, in this back-to-school season, even if it’s not the complete new start that we’d hoped it would be. We press on. We persevere. We remember who and whose we are. We join together in praying earnestly for God to bless and protect our kids, our families, teachers and administrators. And together we put our trust in our God who never lets us go and who never stops loving us into all that lies ahead in this and in all the seasons of life.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Notes: