Ecclesiastes 3:1-8  CEB

3 There is a time for everything,
    and a season for every activity under the heavens:
2 a time to be born and a time to die,
    a time to plant and a time to uproot,
3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
    a time to tear down and a time to build,
4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
    a time to mourn and a time to dance,
5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
    a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
6 a time to search and a time to give up,
    a time to keep and a time to throw away,
7 a time to tear and a time to mend,
    a time to be silent and a time to speak,
8 a time to love and a time to hate,
    a time for war and a time for peace.

We’re continuing our exploration of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, as you just heard Carol read so beautifully for us. 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. We’re listening for the deeper melody in this passage. A word of life. A song of joy. We can hear in these verses, taken as a whole, quilted together, we can hear and see life’s totality and variety as a mosaic of fragments, pieces, experiences, endings and beginnings. 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. God is with us, in all the seasons of our lives. “There’s a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens…” Today we’ll focus on a season for building up.

These last months have been hard in so many ways, and they’ve been hard on the church, haven’t they? From one week to the next we had to pivot and change how we were doing almost everything. Part of that has been an embrace of technology. Many of us have learned how to ZOOM and how to Face Time with family. And not being a digital native, myself, I’ve had to learn a lot and I’ve had to let my mind be changed. Maybe that’s true for you as well. So now, as we plan to resume in-person worship—safely—in September, we’re asking ourselves what that’s going to mean for the life of our congregation. Who are we? Who are we becoming? How is God’s Creating Spirit working in and through us to build up the church?

I wish I could tell you how many people have asked me if, when we do resume in-person worship, we will continue with our online services? All kinds of people. People across the country who cherish their relationship with FUMC. People right here in the community, who, because of illness or age-related issues or work schedules are so grateful for this new way of staying connected and worshipping together. They are overjoyed when I assure them that we are determined to continue and to live into all that being both an in-person and online congregation might look like. Two modes of worshipping, together. One congregation. How is God building us up in ways we might otherwise never have imagined, were it not for our experiences together over this last year and a half?

This new church could challenge some of our long-held assumptions about what church is, who church is, and where church happens. What do you think? Is the church a building or a people?

I think the answer to that question is: “Yes!” A building AND a people. So now we’re talking in-person, in a place, a beloved and sacred place, AND online, in another space, another mode. One congregation.

I’m stressing this because, as God works to build up this new church, we don’t fall into old bad habits of thinking that the online part of the congregation is somehow second class or second rate. And it’s not an “add-on” to the “real” church which gathers here on Sunday mornings. How do we value one another and hold one another in community as one congregation?
We have a lot to learn going forward, and I welcome your thoughts and ideas. And I think we actually have a lot of practice in doing this. Think about it. For example, when we lift up folks in prayer, they are as much a part of this congregation as folks seated in the sanctuary, right? When we rejoice in the great cloud of witnesses, the saints who have gone on before us, they are as essential to our sense of church as people we can see with our eyes, right? When we commission and send out work teams—to New Orleans, Appalachia, northern California, Haiti—though separated by miles and time zones, they form a vital part of the body serving and witnessing in a different mode. One congregation.

And so this morning, church, speaking of Haiti…our hearts are broken by the news of some 2000 people dead in the hurricane and tropical storm. Buildings, schools, churches reduced to rubble. Families, livelihoods, hopes and dreams, shattered. Some of us have had the great privilege of travelling there in person on our work teams over the years. And all of us, as you’ve come to report back, all of us have seen their pictures, heard their names, lifted them in prayer. All of us have reached out generously to send needed resources and support. We are one in the Lord.

And therefore when we heard the news, we responded immediately, working through the relationships there with folks on the ground. We responded immediately because these are our sisters and brothers. They have a claim on our hearts. And we will do all that we can now to stand by them, to encourage them, to pray for them, and to send them, as best we can, what they need to rebuild—medication, first aid supplies and medical equipment, tarps and tents, buckets and water filters, and basic human needs—rice and beans and water.

Please give generously. We’ve already raised close to $5,000 through our networks and we will do more.

Our brothers and sisters, now, through us, need to see “hope.” They need us to be committed for the long-haul. They need to know that our relationships endure. They need to know that we will continue to work through the churches and with other non-profit and agency partners to help alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life for Haitian people. This is a season of building up, and by the grace of God, through the nearly unfathomable greatness of God, we will stand by them, we will work with them, and we will persevere.

For everything, a season. And the Wisdom, the creating Spirit 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. And in this time of building up. A new church that is an ancient church, really, God’s Creating Spirit building us all up in ways old and new in this season. One Spirit, one faith, one body, one hope, one in mission to the world and all its people. And we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one Body in our one Lord.

Thanks be to God. AMEN