“A Time for Everything: A Time to Weep, A Time to Heal”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV)

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
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, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, 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, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

The patchwork quilt of seasons that is Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 names one season with which we are all too familiar these days: a time to weep. You don’t even have to read the paper to feel it—just look at the photos. Photos from Afghanistan, from Haiti, from places where fire is burning out of control, from hospital ICUs without a bed to spare...a time to weep, to lament. It’s a heavy season and it weighs on our hearts and spirits, doesn’t it?

It’s like the smoke in the air we can sense even when the fires are burning far away. Our family in upstate New York told us this week that they’ve been smelling smoke in the air from fires in Ontario, Canada and all the way from the western states. And so much of all this we have inflicted on ourselves, haven’t we? Through our carelessness with the land with which we have been entrusted. Through policy decisions of all kinds which have not addressed basic needs for education, health, equality for people in every place and every station. Through the refusal to get vaccinated and wear masks though it’s abundantly clear that those basic measures of care protect us all.

It’s a time to weep, this season, a time to weep.

Now, in Scripture, weeping and tears are important. They are not signs of defeat, though they may come from times of despair. They are not signs of weakness, though they may come when our strength is spent. They are not indications of hopelessness, though they may come when we feel helpless and lost. No.

In Scripture tears are acknowledged as a gift. The Psalmist sang that our tears are listed in a book: “the God of comfort keeps watch over your weeping and gathers up all your tears and puts them in a bottle and records each one in his book.” Our tears are embraced as being holy and life-giving. Spiritual writers across the centuries have described this as “the gift of tears.” Tears come when our hearts are broken, broken open, open to glimpses of a better way, an alternative path. Tears come, as Leonard Cohen might have said, through the crack where the light gets in.

King David weeps over his sins. The tears of the prophet Jeremiah stream day and night over the ruination of God’s people. The tears of Nehemiah over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem move the heart of the Persian king, causing him to pivot and join in the rebuilding. Peter weeps bitterly after denying Jesus. Jesus weeps at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, who has died.

Joan Chittister writes that weeping “sounds alarms for a society and wisens [makes wiser] the soul of the individual...If we do not weep on the personal level, we shall never understand humanity around us. If we do not weep on the public level, we are less than human ourselves.”

God gives a season to weep. Our tears make us human. Our tears keep us connected to one another. Our tears flow back into the earth from which we come. We mustn’t turn away from the photos. We mustn’t let our hearts grow cold and numb.

The Scriptures are clear: our tears give birth to a new season. They make possible a season to heal.

Over these last weeks, many of you have reached out in ways that reflect exactly what the experts advise in a season of weeping. Join a group, give back, get involved, give money and time to the things you value. Pray.

You’ve donated very generously to the church in Haiti as we work together with them to heal and rebuild. As a new school year has begun, you’ve also supported our Back-to-School supplies campaign to provide much needed backpacks and supplies to kids at the
Sherman Indian High School, and support the School Bell Backpack Program through the Assistance League of Santa Monica, and The People Concern in Santa Monica. You’re signing up to be a donor at next Sunday’s Red Cross Community Blood Drive at Mt. Olive Lutheran Church.

You’ve asked how you can support our veterans, and also how we can support Afghan refugees through UMCOR and Church World Service. You’ve sought out information and connection. You’ve asked how our church could become “greener.” You’ve wanted to know how we can support the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission teams working in Northern California with those who have lost their homes to fire. And I know that together, we’ve been praying mightily.

Our tears open us to a new season, a season of healing and rebuilding. Tears lead us from loss to change.

One article I read recently in a “secular” newspaper, after listing a variety of things we can do, concluded by saying, in BIG BOLD print: “And don’t forget—there’s hope!” And I thought, well, yeah! As people of faith, we get that, right? And as co-creators with God, we just keep on doing what we can figure out to do to prod the world one step closer to the reign of God, as Chittester writes, one idea nearer to the vision of God, one moment closer to the will of God.

How do we keep on doing it, living in hope, standing on the promises?

There’s an old story in the Jewish midrash about a group of disciples who go to their rabbi with a question. “In the book of Elijah, we read: ‘everyone in Israel is duty bound to say, ‘when will my work approach the works of my ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?’ But how are we to understand this, they ask their rabbi? How could we in our time ever venture to think that we could do what they could?”

The rabbi explained: “Just as our ancestors invented new ways of serving, each a new service according to their own character—one the service of love, the other the service of justice, the third the service of beauty—so each one of us in our own way must devise something new in the light of the teachings and of service and do what has not yet been done.”

Ah, church, we live in hope! It’s a time to weep and a time to heal. May God’s ever-creating Spirit open the eyes of our hearts that we may venture to do what has not yet been done.

Thanks be to God! AMEN

Notes:
