

“WHAT TIME IS IT?”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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Well here we are, the first Sunday of a new year. Actually, we are celebrating the first Sunday of a new decade, with apologies to the chronological purists who will tell you that the new decade doesn't actually start until 2021.

But despite those party poopers, another year has passed and we're all going to get another year older. And of course, with the beginning of a New Year, come those New Year's resolutions. I was at the gym at Thomson Community Centre this week and it was amazing the number of new people that I saw, or perhaps they were people I hadn't seen in about a year. Maybe they didn't get a Peloton bike for Christmas.

The beginning of a new year has always been a time for renewal, recommitment, and resolutions. Some years back there was an article in a newspaper that said that no one over the age of 40 should try anything new for the first time. The author wrote - I'm **pushing** 44, which seems to be the only exercise I can achieve with any aplomb these days. He wrote that he's probably suffering from 'manopause,' a condition where a man loses 1% of his testosterone every year he lives past the age of 30. Well, I'm 54, which makes me wonder how much testosterone I have left in my system!

Now I don't believe for a minute that those of us who have gathered here this morning, on this first Sunday of a new year, that no matter what our physical age might be, would be the kind of people who have given up on growing, on learning, on trying something new, on being open to where God wants to take us, what God wants us to become. The very act of our worship is an act rooted in both **memory and hope**, memory of what God has already done for us, **and hope in the promise of what God will still do for us and for all God's creation**. And so, we gather together this morning, in these initial days of the New Year, open to God's possibilities for us.

What **do** you think God has in mind for you this year? **What time is it for you?** The writer of Ecclesiastes understood many years ago, that for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. **What season is it for you? What time is it for you?** Is it a time for planting, or harvesting? A time for building up or breaking down? Perhaps this is your time for throwing away, or maybe for gathering. Is it your time for keeping silence or maybe this is the year to speak? There might be as many diverse answers to the question of what time it is as there are people here this morning.

When we talk about resolutions, about what kind of time this New Year might be for us, I would say that most of us think about doing something, getting something done, achieving something, something new, something worthwhile. When we pose the question of what time it is, especially at the beginning of the year, **most of us respond by imagining what we can do**. But, in spite of all that we **have done** and **can do**,

we are not human **doings**, we are human **beings**.

It makes me wonder, do we sometimes just need to slow down, stop thinking so much about what we need to do, and be more open to **who we are** so that God's healing might take place in us in order that we might become healthier and more whole as God's beloved creations.

Healing – now there's something you don't often hear as a new year's resolution. It's somewhat unconventional, maybe a bit embarrassing. It's probably rooted in our cultural assumption that if we say we need to heal, **it means that we are confessing that we are somehow broken. And not too many people I know willingly want to confess, especially publicly, that they are broken.** But isn't it true that most of us, if not all of us, could use more healing in our lives? So, this morning, on this first Sunday of the New Year, **I want to invite us to be open to God's season of healing in our lives.**

Isn't it's a time to heal?

And there's a lot to heal from, isn't there?

At least the last decade started off well with the 2010 Winter Olympics here in Vancouver. Do you remember those games? Canada won 26 medals, including 14 gold, both records. It brought the country together. But it was also a decade when things became polarized as never before.

Our politics became more divisive, our conversations more angry, the economic divide between the haves and the have nots, especially the 1% or the 0.1% and the rest of us grew larger than it has ever been. The 2010's were the decade of

the “MeToo” movement and the recognition that our world teeters on the cusp of environmental calamity, perhaps irreversibly so.

There was a coarsening of social interaction over the past decade, a lot of it because of the rapid and uncontrollable growth of social media. Online bullying and abuse reached epidemic proportions, and so did the opioid crisis. There’s a growing sense in many parts of the world, including here in Canada, that ordinary citizens, regular people, feel that they just aren’t represented by those in power; that the system just doesn’t work for them anymore. Sometimes that has led to regime change in countries; sometimes it has stirred young people to gather in movements that occupied Wall Street or Vancouver.

I wasn’t here in Vancouver at the time, but I was in Calgary when young people occupied the Olympic Plaza in front of City Hall. There was a palpable anger in the young people gathered there, a rising sense of helplessness against decisions made that they felt they had no ability to influence or impact. And it’s not just the young who were angry. Sometimes the frustration and anger resulted in a backlash against the establishment in the election of populist leaders such as Donald Trump and other politicians around the world who promised to drain the swamp, to promote nationalism and to fortify their borders against outsiders.

And the new decade isn’t starting off on the best note, is it?

The U.S. just assassinated Iran’s top general, possibly precipitating a backlash that might lead to further conflict. Canada managed to stay out of the last war in Iraq, but if there’s another one, will we be as fortunate this time?

Wildfires burn out of control in Australia in a country where the political leadership refuses to take climate change seriously. Civil unrest continues in places like Hong Kong, where we all worry about how it will end.

And what about us personally, individually?

If we're like most Canadians, we might find that despite the recovery of the stock market after the crash of 2008, that given the rising cost of everything else, we might find ourselves financially, at the end of the decade, pretty much where we started off at the beginning of the decade. And while we may bemoan our misfortune in the lack of change in our financial health over the past ten years, most of us would love to be able to say the same for our physical health.

But sadly, for many of us, the news of recent years has been that of declining health, alarming discoveries and troubling diagnoses.

The trouble isn't only limited to our physical health. We are, without a doubt, the most health conscious culture in the history of our planet. We spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year on products and services to address our physical issues. We join health clubs, we start diets, we have surgery for those really tough areas, **but no amount of outward change is going to help us when our inward souls are battered**, by the fracture of a relationship, by the rupture of job loss, by the torment of loneliness and rejection, or a whole host of other invisible injuries.

It's a time to heal, we need to heal, and there is so much to heal from.

But it's so hard to find healing, isn't it? Sometimes people don't give us a chance to heal. People who we need to be reconciled to, die and leave us no opportunity to heal. Little things remind us all the time of the pain we thought we had so carefully hidden away in the deepest recesses of our hearts. We get conditioned into believing that there's precious little we can do about the suffering that we see all around us, **especially when we're so powerless to do anything about the suffering we know too intimately in our own lives.** And what we can't resolve, we repress, and we do not heal. **Our lives get narrower and narrower, until in our fear we convince ourselves that we really can't afford to care, we really can't allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and our daily lives become a mockery of the life God has intended, devoid of compassion, of mercy, of grace.**

It was interesting for me to read that in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for Egypt is ***Mitzrayim***, and it literally means, narrow straights, or narrow places. When God took the Hebrew people out of Egypt, out of *Mitzrayim*, God in effect extricated them from the narrow places, from the place of constricted opportunities, tight control, and narrow-mindedness, where movement was severely limited. **Each of us can find ourselves living in our own *mitzrayim*,** the external or physical narrow straits of financial or health constraints or, in that place of narrowness of mind and heart, from which we find so little possibility of movement.

But the good news is that the same God who brought the people of God out of the narrow places, out of bondage, **also desires to bring us out of our narrow places, our bondage, our *mitzrayim*, and into God's healing and newness.**

There is a hymn which says, *there is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea, there's a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty... for the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind, and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.*

The prophet Isaiah understands this wideness of God's mercy and love when he writes,

***the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners...
to comfort all who mourn...
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.***

God is the God who redeems us from the narrow places and brings us into the fullness of the life that God has desired and intended for us. **We need this healing, it's the season for such healing, and it's a time for God's healing.**

Someone once wrote that when you swallow a stone, you become a stone, and the words of the famous Simon and Garfunkel song describe so aptly what many of us end up doing, bravely trying to project a façade to hide our pain.

I am a rock, I am an island...and a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.

But we do feel pain and we do cry and God hears our cries and God feels our pain.

Part of our healing comes from being vulnerable, being truthful, being able to trust when we think we can never trust again, being able to imagine that the way things are now isn't the way things always have to be.

Listen while I read the scripture from Ecclesiastes again.

Listen for how one of the words you hear, or a word you think of on your own, could describe something you might do this year, something that might be a way for God to move you from your narrow places to the wideness of life God has in mind for you.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

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;

a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

Maybe you need to be born this year to a new idea or commitment, or to die to something or throw away something. Perhaps you need to embrace someone, or love someone, speak out on someone's behalf, make peace with someone. It's an act of healing, to be able to bring that one thing before God, so that God can help move us out of our *mitzrayim* and into wideness of his grace. **Like the children did earlier in the service, take a moment and lift up that word, that possibility, as an offering to God.**

Our healing comes when we admit that we **need** to be healed, that we **want** to be healed. Part of the thinking of our word is an admission to God that there's something that we need to be doing, with God's help, that will bring God's healing in our lives. **Healing, God's healing, starts with the desire to be healed. It means that we can't hold on to our pain like a rock, like an island. We can't stay in our narrow places, where, we have to admit, it can become pretty comfortable.** We get used to the constrictedness and sometimes it's nice to wallow in the self pity of being thought of as a martyr. **But healing comes when we realize that it's time to get a new life instead of always mourning the old one.**

Healing comes when we realize that we aren't finished creations, none of us, and it doesn't matter whether we're over 40 or not. **God has more; God has new things in mind for us. Maybe we can't imagine how we could be really that much different than we are,** but God can, and God has, and God has hopes for us beyond our imagining.

Healing comes as we take that first step, in trust, with hope, into newness. And healing comes with the passage of time. We need to be patient, with God and with ourselves. Healing isn't just some magic trick, as if suddenly, in the blink of an eye, God can make us forget all that has hurt us, as if it never happened. No, healing comes from the process itself, it comes as we wrestle with the pain and as we learn to transcend that narrowness which threatens to control us, define us and shape us, and as we learn to embrace the wideness of God's mercy, God's love and God's hope. **Only by living through the time it takes to move from our *mitzrayim* to our wide places, can we experience true healing.** Ecclesiastes says that there is a **time** for healing, and **time** is such an essential component to our healing.

What time is it for you is the question with which this sermon started. **It's a time to heal, for unless we heal, how can we bring healing to others, to the pain we see around us?** There's wideness to God's mercy which is wider than the sea. There's a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind, and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind. This is our steadfast hope, this is our healing. **So friends, let this be a season of our healing, a time of our renewal, by the gift and grace of God.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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