



Christine Chakoian's Sermon – 9/02/18

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Seasons

"A hard frost hits in September, sometimes as early as Labor Day," writes Garrison Keillor, describing life in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota:

"A hard frost hits and kills the tomatoes that we, being frugal, protected with straw and paper tents, which we, being sick of tomatoes, left some holes in. The milkweed pods turn brown and we crack them open to let the little seeds float out across the garden on their wings of silvery hair. Toward the end of September, the field corn is ready to be picked. ...

"One Saturday in October, Mayor Clint Bunsen puts up his storm windows, and the next Saturday everyone else does, including Byron Tollefson and his boy Johnny, home from college, who asks, 'Why do we have to do it today just because everyone else is?' ...

It was chilly the next night in Lake Wobegon, and the night after that. October stayed cold; soon enough it was Halloween, and on its heels, November. And then,

"A big storm blew in on a Wednesday, a storm that nobody saw coming, not even Bud who knows weather like my father knows the Great Northern and calls the storms as they roll in from the Coast.

"Freezing rain fell in the morning, turning to heavy snow, and by suppertime we had thirteen inches on the ground and more coming, falling sideways in front of a stiff west wind, and you couldn't see the house across the street. ... This [storm] caught Bud leaning toward autumn."

Seasons. The seasons roll through every year. Spring, its flowers and translucent leaves unfurling before your eyes. Summer, hot and lush, the scent of pine needles so strong, you can taste it. Fall, extravagant colors painted against the bright blue sky. Winter, its wind sharp and wet and bracing.

Seasons. We know they're coming, and only fools pay no attention to them.

Just as surely as the seasons of the year roll by, so do the seasons of our life. Childhood. Youth. Adulthood. Old age. "To everything there is a season," says the Scriptures, "and a time for every purpose under heaven." As surely as each season of the year has its own timing and purpose, so does each changing season of our lives.

Those of us who are parents see it most obviously. In the beginning, as parents as infants, we are utterly clueless. I'll never forget the feeling after our daughter Annie was born and they sent us home from the hospital. I thought what on earth are they doing, sending me home with this infant? I have NO IDEA what I'm doing!! Then, just when we figure out how to be nurturing and available, we become parents of toddlers who WANT TO DO IT MYSELF. God help us when we become parents of adolescents and we can't do ANYTHING right! Just when we master the requirements of one stage, another stage brings its own new demands.

But it's not just parents – all of us feel the shifting nature of our purpose over time. Over the course of decades, we may be called first to be a student, and then have a career ... a parent, and then caretaker of our own parents ... a spouse, and then suddenly widowed. At one point in our lives we may be called to be a leader in our circles, and at another point be called to live in near obscurity. In one chapter, we may lead wildly busy lives, with no chance to relax or rest; and in another, we may find ourselves restless and searching, with more time on our hands than we know what to do with.

The changing of life's seasons isn't easy. It requires us to alter much of what we do. It brings changes in our image of ourselves, the nature of our usefulness and purpose. It means giving up things that had been meaningful: the dependence of childhood is exchanged for the freedom of youth; the freedom of youth for the responsibility of adulthood; the responsibility of adulthood for both the freedom and the losses of old age.

Nevertheless, as hard as change is, it comes, as inevitably as summer follows spring. The only season of our lives that we are ever called to be in is the one we're living now. The question is, will we be faithful in it?

Twenty-six years ago, when my family moved to Portland, Oregon from Chicago, I got caught leaning into the wrong season. All my life I had prepared for my career. I grew up in the church, majored in religious studies, took my masters at Yale Divinity School, served two large, prestigious churches. I loved my work, and my ministry was succeeding beyond my wildest dreams. While I was at Fourth Church in Chicago, and caught up in that absurdly busy place, I managed to find time to get married to John, and then, a year and a half later, we had our daughter, Annie. All of it a little older than I'd hoped for, but still "in time"! Then we decided to make the move to Portland for John's career. We bought a house in the suburbs, and our new life began.

And suddenly, moving here without a job, my life had changed completely. I didn't know a soul there, and I was at home alone with a baby. Now I had chosen this change, but I was still caught unprepared. My career had disappeared, and with it, the only purpose I had ever known. I had no sense of myself. No one to tell me what a great job I'd done. No public acclamation. No inspiring sense of making a difference. Just the ceaseless routine of feedings, diapers, laundry, naps ... feedings, diapers, laundry, naps ... feedings, diapers, laundry, naps ... over, and over, and over again.

Then, ever so slowly, it began to dawn on me. This was my life now. It may have utterly no relationship with my prior identity, my Brooks' Brothers suit life in downtown Chicago, but it was my life anyway. And slowly, ever so slowly, I began to invest in it. Not everything, mind you – I knew I'd go stark raving mad if I kept ironing my husband's handkerchiefs; I would turn into my mother! But much of it, I discovered, was unexpectedly freeing. I loved my sweet baby, of course – but I also began to love my life, this utterly new and foreign existence, this new self. I loved pushing the stroller to the park each day, putting Annie in the baby-swing. I loved reading books with her each evening before bed ... it's no wonder she turned out to be a children's librarian! And I learned to be myself. I was, in fact, the same person. I still had my talents and my aspirations. And someday, I might get to them again – or I might not. I didn't know. But what I did know was that for now, for this season, this was what I was called to do. Later, in God's providence, a church in Portland called me there to work on a very part-time basis – to job-share, in fact, with another young mother. It was sweet. And I loved that season more than I had ever loved a season of my life before.

My life has changed many times since then. Just four years later, we went back to Chicago, when John's Mom died suddenly of a heart attack, and, since John's Dad had sadly died very, very young, we felt called to return to help take care of John's Grandma. I pastored two wonderful churches in the Chicago area – one of them in the western suburbs, where I got to know President Esterline and his family, and later up on the North Shore in Lake Forest. Now I'm serving at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where I get to work for amazing people, and soak up the wisdom of our wonderful professors. I'm working, of all things, in Advancement – a career shift that I never would have predicted. I'm in a completely new role, in a new location with a new identity – and I don't know if I'll ever return to parish ministry, or not. Who knows? But this I know for sure: I am so very glad I leaned into the season of young motherhood when I was in it – for at the time, I could not have known that I would only be such a very, very short season.

I was caught leaning into the season I had left – and I was unprepared for the new season when it came. But sometimes we find ourselves leaning into the next season of our lives too soon, too early. A friend of mine in Chicago has been watching her elderly husband's slow decline in health; his condition is undoubtedly terminal. For three years, all she has focused on is his dying. Her mind can't concentrate; her work has suffered; her heart is so heavy with grief, she cannot experience joy.

But last fall, something changed. It is as if she woke up one morning and realized that she'd been leaning into the wrong season. She had been living in the season of her husband's death when she was still, in fact, in the season of her husband's living.

This shift has made all the difference. It is as if she is living in her own life again, living in the present, instead of anticipating a season that had not quite yet arrived. This season, the present time, is not a season of death, but a season of life – a season in which she still has important work to do, and friends to visit, and most of all, a husband, her husband, to tend to and enjoy as long as he is here.

And what of us, right here, right now? It feels like summer in Pittsburgh still. The air is warm, the trees are full and lush, and soon, the tomatoes will overwhelm our capacity to eat them. It's hard to believe that it's Labor Day weekend already. Children have already started school, and some of my friends are posting weepy pictures of dropping their freshmen off at college. Last week, a great passel of new seminary students finished orientation, and classes start next week. And all of this means that fall is right around the corner, with cooler days and falling leaves, and soon – too soon - winter again on its heels. But until then, let us savor this season that we have.

What season is it for you, in your own life? Is it a season of accomplishment and opportunity - or is it, instead, a season of loss, or failure, or even a season of grief? Is it a season of work consuming every minute, of schedules and relentless meetings - or is it a season of retirement and slowing down, of sampling the freedom of time? Is it a season of busy-ness, of young children or aging parents to take care of - or is it a season of life's tempering, of embracing your own aging body as you rediscover your new limits every day?

As surely as the summer comes every year, and soon the fall, so do the seasons of our lives unfold. Some are easier to take than others. Some we welcome, and some we dread. But they come regardless, and the question really is, will we be faithful to our purpose in this season of our lives? I believe God has blessed our lives with purpose and with meaning – not just in general, but in particular – right here, right now, in the only season that is ours to live today.

Yesterday at Sen. John McCain's wonderful memorial service, one of the eulogists shared this quote: "Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that will ever come can depend on what you do today."

Writer Frederick Buechner once put it this way:

"'This is the day which the Lord has made,' says the 118th Psalm. 'Let us rejoice and be glad in it.' Or weep and be sad in it for that matter. The point is to see [this season] for what it is because it will be gone before you know it. If you waste it, it is your life that you're wasting."

And if you live in it, lean into it, whatever season this may be, you will find God's life and hope and purpose for however long this season lasts.

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to reap; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away." (Eccl. 3)

For God has made everything beautiful – beautiful in its own time. Amen.