

BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Intro

So I don't know if you've heard...but apparently today is New Year's Day?

Yeah, exactly: not the biggest of surprises.

For some folks, New Year's Day is an arbitrary marker that hopefully ends the difficulties and struggles of the year that has just passed.

For others, this day causes people to look out toward what is to come and pine for the days of the year just passed (and that is regardless of how the previous year may have gone).

This morning's opening passage addresses all of those realities (and the kaleidoscope of perspectives that weave themselves all in and throughout) with truths that can be hard to hear.

And yet, if we are able to hear these words through the lens of faith, they are able to be a reminder that the God of all Creation is the God of every season of our life. The scripture reads this way.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

3For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Matthew 25:31-46

Intro

Our second passage shows in a very clear way that judgement will come...in God's time. The revealing thing about this articulation of judgement is that those who are judged end up being surprised (and this takes place on both sides of the judgement) because judgement is not about being the most religious (as too many people within too many religions have both taught and believed), but instead because of how they lived with those who are around them: both those whom they know and (as the passage absolutely articulates) those whom they do not.

Many people hear these verses and become afraid, afraid that they aren't doing enough, or doing the right things.

My hope, however, is that you are able to hear these words as the natural and appropriate consequence to the call that was placed before all people: to love God and your neighbor as yourself. And if you are wondering if there is still time, the short answer (which is always the answer) is yes: yes, there is still time. The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 25:31-46

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

'Breathe In, Breathe Out'

New Year's almost necessarily causes people to, if not make, then at least think about resolutions, if for no other reason than because so many people around them are thinking and talking about resolutions.

I stopped into the office on Friday to finish up this sermon and the voicemail that I picked up carried that very 'this is one of my New Year's resolutions' sentiments. Yes, the media certainly pushes the thought, but the fact that we flip the number on the calendar naturally pushes us in that direction as well.

That very much felt like the impetus for the scripture readings for today. The reason that I believe this is because finality (even of something as simple as a year) tends to cause people to do one of two things: either give up and resign themselves to the way things are (either for the good or the bad), or make a stand, digging in their heels and making their best effort to go in what they perceive to be a better and healthier direction.

Looking at the passages in reverse order, Jesus words to his disciples, his friends, just prior to the events that we know as Maundy Thursday are to act as a calendar flip moment so as to cause, not only the disciples to make their own personal stands, but also to implore the disciples to allow those stands to

become emblematic for all those who will ultimately follow them in their faith walk with the soon to be risen Jesus. Jesus is saying that the New Year, the new creation is coming. Don't wait to make that shift of loving God and neighbor in your life: do it today!

I know, some of you are thinking, 'wait, didn't we just celebrate Jesus being born...and now we're already dealing with him as he approaches the cross? Can't we get a breather?'

The short answer is 'no'.

Why?

Because the Word made flesh came into the world with a purpose and the fact that we are reminded of his ultimate purpose on the heels of remembering his birth, with all of the celebratory trappings still hung throughout the sanctuary, shows that this purpose is not put on hold even as we continue to reflect in the glow of the candlelight of Christmas Eve.

No, God wants us to breathe in a new way. God wants us to breathe in a way that may end up leaving us surprised when that time of judgement comes like a thief in the night, to find out all of the ways that we were able to be in the presence of God throughout our lives. Breathe in a way that not only worships Him but serves Him by knowing how God is able to be in those who are around us (and yes, that includes those whose names we know and certainly those whose names we never had the opportunity to hear).

God wants us to breathe in a new way and the theologians who put the lectionary together recognize that being reminded of that purpose on a day such as New Year's Day catches us in a space where we are already thinking about those places that we feel a pull to take a stand.

And that's why the first passage from Ecclesiastes is so necessary and ultimately reassuring: the God whom we have been led to know and worship, to breathe in and breathe out, is a God who journeys with us through all the seasons of our life: the good and the bad; the easy and the hard; the joy-filled and the heart-breaking.

As was mentioned on Christmas Eve, the presence of God does not necessarily mean that everything will be rainbows and lollipops, and the (perceived) abandonment of God does not mean the assurance of all things difficult.

When we acknowledge this truth we are able to begin to see God in and through every season of life, breathing Him in and out ever more freely.

One of the analogies that I have heard connected to this understanding is that it's much like any form of exercise: if you are able to have control of your breath, you are able to make the movements and adjustments that you need to make. Steady your breath knowing that God is with us.

This morning's message is not a ground breaking one filled with ideas that you've never heard before.

It's not meant to be.

Instead, it is a reiteration on this New Year's Day, to make a stand with and for God, learning how to breathe Him in and out ever more freely as we understand that He abides with us in every season of life.

Take a deep breath in and hold it: know that God is with you.

Allow that breath to exhale and understand that having God with You allows each of us to serve Him in ways both known and certainly unknown.

Breathe God in. Breathe God out.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, on this New Year's Day, we are able to think about the various stands that we should make. Your Word reminds us, and rightly so, that all of those various commitments should abide in You, for You are in and through all things. So Lord, allow Your Spirit to move so that we might be able to breathe You in and breathe You out. Regardless of the season of life that we are currently facing or the season of life that is to come, You abide...with us. Lord, steady our breathing so that You are able to ever more become engrafted into who we are. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.