

Year C - Christmastide 2  
2 January 2022

Do you know where you were on December 6, 1965?

I was in Springfield, Illinois. We lived at 32 Dawn Drive.

I *think* my family celebrated my first birthday. I have no recollection of this event or pictures to prove it happened. I *can prove* I was baptized on December 5th at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

The Byrds released an album titled Turn, Turn, Turn featuring a song of the same name on December 6, 1965. Turn, Turn, Turn is an adaptation of Ecclesiastes 3 written by Pete Seeger. The single of Turn, Turn, Turn was released on October 1 in the United States and went to Number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100.

This is arguably the best known passage from the entire book of Ecclesiastes. I would guess it is among the most popular passages of the old testament.

Because of its great poetry it is often read at funerals. There is great comfort in those familiar words. It is a poem for all seasons. There is something for everyone.

Right in the middle of the 39 books of the Old Testament are the Wisdom books. These include selected Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.

In the words of Ellen Davis, Wisdom literature is spiritual guidance for ordinary people. That guidance comes from ordinary people. This is unusual. Much of the old testament is law and history . . . God speaking through Moses or other prophets.

The biblical writers thought wisdom was attainable to anyone who truly desired it. It did not require special knowledge or a specific pedigree. Wisdom meant living one's life so that God was honored and glorified. It was a matter of the heart, not the mind. The fruit of wisdom was an ordered life and a peaceful mind.

This desire to glorify God is special to Reformed and Presbyterian Christians. In our (PCUSA) Book of Confessions, Question #1 of the Longer and Shorter Catechisms is "What is the chief end of our existence?" The answer is to glorify god.

The poetry of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 uses fourteen pairs of verbs -- 28 words -- that encompass our humanity.

birth and death

planting and plucking

breaking down and building up

mourning and dancing

When I read this passage, I am reminded of physics, specifically, the three laws of motion. The third rule states for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction.

In chemistry this is polarity.

A literary reference which frames this concept is Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* -- "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

This is the stuff of life. The good, the bad and the ugly.

Henry van Dyke was a Presbyterian clergyman, who taught English literature at Princeton and also served as a diplomat during World War I. A skilled writer, his literary contributions include the lyrics to the hymn, "Joyful, joyful we adore thee."

In 1904 he penned a poem called *Time is ...* perhaps you'll recognize it.

Time is  
 too slow for those who wait,  
 too swift for those who fear,  
 too long for those who grieve,  
 too short for those who rejoice,  
 but for those who love,  
 time is eternity.

What kind of year was 2021? Was it a good year or a bad year? Was it somewhere in between? Will it make your list of bests or worsts? Have you reflected on it? I was asked to preach on January 2nd, so I took some time to reflect on 2021.

The general vibe at the conclusion of any year is good riddance. There is optimism in the new year, but the old year is tossed with the torn wrapping paper and Christmas cards or shelved with the decorations.

Experience and reflection are key components of wisdom. The tincture of time is what allows us to put our experiences into perspective. It is hard to know what the best or the worst of times are while we are going through them. A thoughtful examination days, months or even years down the road can help us come to terms with a memory that is realistic rather than nostalgic, romantic or dramatic.

Upon further reflection, 2021 was a good year for me. Even in the midst of a pandemic, so many good things happened to me.

On January 2, 2021 -- one year ago today -- Wendy and I were married. It was a peaceful and beautiful snowy day. The ceremony and reception were downsized due to covid regulations. The pandemic limits really simplified the occasion and liberated us to enjoy ourselves.

Last January, I learned of the deaths of three people who attended high school with me. That was just the beginning. Throughout 2021, the losses continued. If it wasn't a friend, it was the parent of a friend or the spouse of a friend. Co-workers, neighbors and even a couple of bible study friends joined the church triumphant in 2021.

Last year, we enjoyed our first vacation in a some time. We spent a leisurely week in New Bern, North Carolina during spring break. We connected with old and new friends and we walked extensively in this historic community. We worshiped at three different churches during holy week. We sampled the local fare and enjoyed unstructured fun time.

The application process for inquirer status with the Presbytery of Lake Michigan started in February and was completed in May. This was a very

positive experience. Our pastors, the session, the committee on preparation for ministry have been very supportive.

Originally, I was considering theological studies in the fall of 2022. My plan was to visit three or four schools during the remainder of the year.

Our first visit was Western Theological Seminary on July 27. The admissions staff was embarrassed and apologetic about our visit. The air conditioning had failed in part of the building. There weren't many students or faculty to meet. From my standpoint, there were tremendous opportunities. There was even some hope of significant financial aid.

I was out of reasons to wait for seminary. I asked my employer for a part-time role and my request was granted. I was accepted as a student in mid august and received a scholarship. I started classes on August 31.

There is a term in church polity that acknowledges what we do is only part of the equation. everything is up to god. That phrase is "if the way be clear." In terms of timing and coordination, my entry at Western Theological Seminary was nothing short of miraculous. The way was clear. It was time for school.

Now school has changed quite in a bit in the decades since I last matriculated. The technology has completely revolutionized the experience. For me that was -- and continues to be -- intimidating. I was surrounded by lots of young people who were smart and talented and navigated the technology effortlessly. There was a surreal quality to my early days at Western. I had avoided or put off seminary for more than three decades. It was hard to believe it was actually happening.

There were occasions of affirmation, too.

In October I had a call from Jean Parker from the mission ministry team. She wanted me to know that I was receiving an award in the amount of \$500 from the Heinze/Woodard/Burtis/Hill/Swan Fund. This was a pleasant surprise. I want to publicly thank the mission ministry team for their generosity.

December 16 I received a check from the Presbytery of Lake Michigan in the amount of \$750. This was courtesy of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said “faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

I can honestly say I wasn't sure where the staircase was, let alone the railing or the first step. While I now recognize it was time for seminary, I was the last person to get the message! More than a few people who know me well said, “It’s about time!”

I just remind them that for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...

So...what time is it? We are on the ninth day of Christmas. We are on the 13th day since the winter solstice. 2022 is not even 35 hours old.

The world would push us to make resolutions and set new goals... fill up the calendar with new stuff. The world said Christmas ended December 25. The world also starts retail Advent between Labor day and Halloween.

We are supposed to be in the world but not of the world. As a community of faith we enter 2022 considering how best to serve God and community.

Henry van Dyke wrote an essay in the early 20th century that still speaks to the church about Christmas more than a century later.

This is called Keeping Christmas. (book)

Ecclesiastes 3: 8 is explicit -- there is a time to love. Jesus emphasized that at least thirteen different times. The time to hate is reserved for evil, injustice, famine, destruction and corruption. The synoptic gospels -- Matthew, Mark and Luke -- remind us the greatest commandment was to love God. The second commandment was to love our neighbor as ourselves. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Christina Rossetti wrote a poem, originally titled Christmastide in 1885. This became the lyrics for the hymn, “Love Came Down at Christmas.” (this

appeared in the old green Presbyterian hymnal which was first published in 1933)

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Stars and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the godhead,  
Love incarnate, love divine;  
Worship we our Jesus:  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to god and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

So let's keep Christmas. Let the love of Bethlehem change you. In 2022 experience the love of Christ as he travels to Nazareth, Jerusalem and cavalry. It's about time.

Shall we pray

May the lord make our new year a happy one...

Not by shielding us from sorrow and pain,  
but by strengthening us to bear it if it comes.

Not by making our path easy, but by making us sturdy enough to tread any  
path.

Not by taking hardship from us, but by taking all cowardice and fear from  
our hearts as we meet hardships.

Not by granting us unbroken sunshine, but by keeping our faces bright  
even in the shadows.

Not by making our lives always pleasant but by showing us where people  
and his cause need us most and by making us zealous to be there and to  
help. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of Christ attend you,  
the love of God surround you,  
the Holy Spirit keep you!

May each and every one of us...

Live in hope!

Abound in grace!

Grow in love!

and all God's people said...Amen

Hymns

Glory to God #143, #150, #159

Pastoral Prayer

Sourcebook #53 - Brevity of Life