

January 1, 2023
New Year's Day

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

"The Best Gift Yet"

When we come back from Christmas break it is not uncommon to hear the question, "*What'd you get?*" The year my nephew God a "he-man" toothbrush and played the jingle from it over and over and over again I might have answered – "I got a memory – which will be with me till the day I die."

Today we are at the cross roads of two milestones. Christmas is coming to an end and today is New Year's Day. Christmas does turn out to be all about the gifts. Not so much those under the tree as the gift of God's self in the manger. New Year's Day is much less clear to us. But it has become very important in our culture. Our text meets us today as we both live in and ponder the experience of time. As we experience a varied life experience, our text offers us several gifts in this special moment – if we will receive them.

Life is multi-faceted. We know this intuitively, but somehow, we would prefer a little less variety. We are sure life would be way better if only those things we want or appreciate came about. Our text tells us there is a time and a season for everything. Sometimes that is appreciated and sometimes we aren't so sure. I had an unusual experience recently. Ordinarily, I am the guy standing in the long line at the post office, having stopped by with only a little time to spare, and the line isn't moving because someone at the front of the line has a complicated mailing and needs help sorting it out. That is always me – waiting in line. But recently, I was the one working with the clerk at the window trying to sort out an international mailing to the UK. And as I got help, other people needing help came to other windows – and the line grew. As I was leaving a man glared at me – with his package still under his arm leaving the post office. He was clearly upset and it occurred to me it would not be unreasonable to say to him, "For everything there is a time and a season." Which, of course, I did not. But I thought to myself how silly we can be – myself included – allowing a line in a post office to ruin our day. Our author wants us to remember in every situation, there is always a bigger picture. Life is not always easy or pleasant. But it is always good. It is worth our hanging in there with it.

How many of you noticed on Christmas Eve – or even this morning – that ***we did not wake up in Camelot?*** You know, "*A law was made a distant moon ago here – July and August must not be too hot. And there's a legal limit to the snow here, in Camelot!*" We don't live there do we. But it is a self-defeating pattern of behavior

to wish we did. When we think about it, we remember Camelot ends tragically. Life is meant to have the varied colors and hues which it does. Some of which we enjoy and some we really don't. This time of year we have a propensity to remember last year and think only of all that was wrong with it. And there was plenty wrong with it. For example, shame on Vladimir Putin for shelling civilian infrastructure to annex a country which isn't his. But those bad things aren't all there were. There were good things last year as well. And in our traditional year end practice we not only see only last year's warts – but we have unreasonable expectations of what the coming year can be. Perhaps spun sugar at the county fair. But we can't live on that...we can't even live on elephant ears. Yes, we are right to have hope. But not the kind of hope which can't handle it when it turns out to be time for something we didn't want.

As we leave the old and enter the new year, we know, deep down, that *there is a deeper meaning to life*. Life is more than crossing the "T's" and dotting the "I's". But our text today tells us that God's presence and life is woven into those moments we experience as ordinary. It is God's work to redeem life – it is our calling to live it. *"I know there is nothing better for people to do than be happy and enjoy themselves and take pleasure in all their labor."* We have too often believed we cannot please God without being overly serious or sour faced saints. The work we do in life also gets a nod for being a blessing. In all seasons, what we would call "good" and what we see as "bad" – life is a gift, God is present, and our lives are blessed. How wise we are to take ourselves a little less seriously and the grace of God a little more.

The musical group, "Chicago", asked the question, "Does anybody really know what time it is?" Our author today says, "Probably not – but that's Okay." God has given us rich and varied lives to live, in season and out, and that may be the best gift yet.