

I think there's been a security breach. Perhaps I should change the password on my iPhone. Don't ask me how or why, but the author of Ecclesiastes has just recited my entire calendar for the previous year. How did he/she know?!? It's like they have one of those Google machines!

I've presided over a baby dedication and a funeral; I've planted and plucked up tomatoes; I have both destroyed and resurrected my lawn; I've broken down more cardboard boxes than I care to count, and the girls and I have built at least a few dozen magna-tile towers. Just yesterday, I managed to laugh, weep, dance, and grieve, all in one sitting – Somebody really should send a letter of complaint to the executives at Pixar, not to mention the copywriters for Subaru and Carefree gum commercials.

I've been spring cleaning since March, and yet I've gathered more than enough junk to offset the difference. Somehow, during this pandemic season there have been times to embrace neighbors, NOT embrace neighbors, and even something in between – fist bumps, nods, virtual hugs, and "you know I would, if I could!" statements. This morning I lost, sought, and found my car keys.

I really, really, really want to keep every piece of artwork my toddlers create, and yet I acknowledge that surely there is a season to throw away, or at least find a nice farm in the country where those pieces of construction paper can dance underneath the shade of Crayola trees.

There have been countless seams – in clothing, in paper, in relationships – sometimes I've done the ripping; sometimes I've done the mending. Some days, especially after that second cup of coffee, I

want to say everything to everybody. Other times, the silence washes over me, and there's not one word worth breaking its timely beauty.

I have loved in this past year – family, friends, neighbors, even strangers. People of all shapes and sizes have created pockets or moments, where there has been a feeling of mutual belonging, connectedness, and value. And yet despite this oozing warmth, I have hated, too. Not so much specific people, but the destructive choices we make and the callous opinions we form, some more consequential than others. Our stubbornness to be right, or proud, or self-sufficient so often pops the potential bubbles of serendipitous community. Of course, our stubbornness is a two-sided characteristic. How beautiful our stubbornness is when it insists upon peace; how reckless and tragic our stubbornness is, when it insists upon conflict, domination, and ultimately war.

For everything there is a season. In eight verses and 28 actions, our writer catalogs (and quite well I might add!), the depth and breadth of human existence. I like this teacher. I feel confident in our wise preacher. And so, with you, I ask, "What then, O wise, friend, O learned one, O bird before The Byrds, might we do with this information? Tell us, please!"

Well...Sardis...that's where it gets a little tricky. Turns out, our wisdom teacher is just as overwhelmed by the mystery of the universe as you and me.

"Vanity. Vanity! All is vanity," he/she proclaims to open Ecclesiastes. No, not like *Your So Vain*. But more like a vapor or a cloud. Divine answers are elusive for our writer – here one minute, gone the next.

Our teacher sees the jagged, mysterious beauty of our complex existence. But our teacher is no longer interested in seeking decimal point answers about creation and our Creator.

“Here’s what you need to know,” our writer says, “Two words: Wow and Ahh.” The writer bids us to be in awe of all of this divine awesomeness around us. And amid this awesomeness, as we experience and partake in the routines of life, the author bids us to seek happiness, and enjoy the world around us.

Let me stop here for a moment. I believe that today’s lection is indicative of well-known scripture passages that get all messed up by contemporary application and lazy theology.

The writer is NOT instructing each of us to eat, drink, and be merry in a silo. This passage is not a license to hoard resources and ignore human need. Nor is it an indictment of our ability to affect positive and transformative change in our world.

The writer is NOT instructing all who are grieving, lonely, burdened, or troubled to suck it up and be happy. The writer very clearly acknowledges the seasonality of human emotions and actions. There is a time for everything. And seasons are not to be rushed.

Here’s what I think our wise teacher is telling us.

The catalog of human experience is a reminder to practice empathy. For everything there is a season. Can you imagine the kind of community we could build here at Sardis if we started each day with an acknowledgement that our individual seasons – the events and feelings

in our own lives – may not always align with the individual and collective seasons of those around us?

The liturgical calendar is a wonderful tool. It is neat and orderly, and when implemented, we can strategically map out our faith story, and indeed our human experiences over the course of a calendar year. But high church, low church, or free-church-liturgical, the calendar and other traditions cannot control the spontaneous effects of grief, or joy, or anxiety on our hearts and spirits. Nor will their application, even in the most precise execution, suddenly illumine and clear up every spiritual question we pursue.

I think we can be and do authentic Church, and be intellectual, and thoughtful, too, and still offer grace to those who are feeling blue at Christmas, or whimsical in the somberness of Lent, or even grumpy during the Halle chorus. And while I am at it, I love that this church decided long ago it was okay to use the red paraments on more than one day a year. I think we can be God's people in any color fabric.

Always remember, our rituals are intended to remind us of Christ's seasonal experiences – experiences similar to our own living. And they help us see God, to see the holy in these ordinal feelings and activities. They do not, however, require us to work like a stopwatch. The good news of Christmas, and Epiphany, and Easter are just as good in ordinary times if our hearts, minds and spirits are able to be more present at a later date.

But I digress...what a gift it would be to live in a community of unsynchronized time!

I believe the author also gives us the grace to accept the mystery of life. Our daily toil, be it in our households, faith houses, workplaces, or other various communities, will NOT, I repeat, will NOT alter the natural and unexplainable laws of the universe, nor will our toil reveal the full mystery of God. That's just not something we can control. But we can still derive meaning in our lives.

We cannot end death, or natural disasters, but we can certainly be present with neighbors who are affected by their suddenness. We aren't created to fix, but we are equipped to heal. We cannot lasso the sun, and most of us in this meetinghouse today will likely never stand on the moon, but that doesn't mean we cannot enjoy their warmth and light, and be reminded of a God of provisions. We may not always live in synchronous joy and laughter and dancing, but we can certainly offer rainchecks when our neighbors aren't able to hear the music play. We can remember that to eat, drink, and be merry are communal acts.

So...Sardis, it's a new year! What do you reckon would happen if we stopped trying so hard to explain the mystery of God and instead started working to experience the mystery of God in our daily living? And what if we let mystery happen in its own time, in its own seasons, in each individual heart and mind?

I dare say we might find a 2022 full of wow and aah.

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.