

“Cherishing the Times of Our Lives”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 “*There is a time for every purpose under heaven*”
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I made a resolution to **not resolve to improve anything** I do this year.

- I am not going to diet.
- I am not going to pull muscles or re-injure my back exercising harder.
- My lawn is not going to be the envy of my neighbors.
- I am not going to **push myself harder** than I already do.

Before I tell you **what I am going to change**—let me tell you why.

I was out in Southern California. Life is not perfect there. They too have a dysfunctional government; even the Terminator is exasperated. The legendary weather is not perfect although they went to great lengths to make it appear so on TV. They hired several helicopters to dry the field for the Rose Bowl—after spending \$60,000 on a tarp to cover it during torrential rain. Los Angeles has an obsession with looking good.

My brother Paul, and his wife Annie, have 2 little kids. The oldest, Mellisa, 4, is adorable. Her mother, who is originally from China, with degrees from Japan and USC, is always pushing her. At age 3 she sought out special dance lessons. The instructor told her it was too early. The piano teacher said essentially the same thing. She fretted about preschools because you need the “**right start**” to get into the **right** prep school to gain admission to the **right** college. “*In this competitive world you can’t ever be a step behind.*” This is the Asian ambition and intensity that almost guarantees we’ll all be working for the Chinese some day.

I had an earlier conversation with my brother, Paul. “You folks need to lighten up,” I said. “Melissa is 4 and will be delightfully innocent until about 10 or 11, the age when you start to lose them.”

“How’s that?” Paul queried.

I detailed the anxious preteen years. Then I launched into a clinical description of adolescence. The period when they are not quite adult but no longer kids; a place in which no one should have to live. “Enjoy the next 6-7 years because they don’t last! Just do things with her, these are precious years. You will need memories of these sweet years to draw on during the teen years when you will want to run away.” After I finished saying this I remembered someone else **TRYING** to tell me the same thing 15 years ago.

So, while relaxing out in California, I resolved to do one thing better.

To more fully cherish the time the Lord has allotted me on earth.

Stop worrying, stop fretting, stop pressing...

enjoy each season of life because in each season of life there is so much to enjoy!

This Ecclesiastes text is well known because the Birds wrote “**Turn, Turn Turn,**” and it found its way into American sanctuaries during the folk music era. It is in our old brown songbooks! The text is

timeless because it is about something that remains elusive to most people until they reach about the age of 50. It is a wisdom that many NEVER recognize. In a word: “**Perspective.**”

The Truth is that **only God** can make our labors mean something important and eternal. So our task is to live fully and completely in the moment: to enjoy our labors and our pleasures, confident in the goodness of God to make the times of our lives mean more than we can ever make them mean. If you are looking for it in popular culture, you will find things that affirm the timeless truths of the Bible. I was drying out from two hours of sitting in the driving rain watching the Rose Parade, wrapped in a blanket reading the LA Times. In the Book Review section was a review of a book titled, “**HAPPINESS: A HISTORY**” by Darrin McMahon. As Americans we have a religious devotion to the idea that we are to pursue our own happiness.

The reviewer wrote, “**we are willing to medicate any condition that gets in the way of the hunt for happiness.**”

This long book summarizes the history of the idea of happiness through the writings of various philosophers and authors. Most notable is the attention paid to ROUSSEAU, whom the author credits with establishing some of the self defeating snares of the happiness quest. In the commercial and industrial world of the west, our attempts to satisfy desires inevitably leads us to new forms of desire and as a result, to fresh frustration.

Echo of Ecclesiastes: “all toil is meaningless.”

“Everything here on earth is in a continual flux which allows nothing to assume any constant form. All things change round about us, we ourselves change, and no one can be sure of loving tomorrow what he loves today. All our plans of happiness in this life are therefore empty dreams.”

Americans have been bamboozled, perhaps by the Aristotles of the advertising world, into thinking of happiness as an elusive kind of emotional state that can be secured by getting and following the right set of directions. **If I only had this house**, or that job, or peace in my family, I would be happy. This turns the minds of people who would haunt themselves with fantasies of the perfect life. The author even worries that we might become so frustrated in our search for this grail that we will meddle with genes and turn human nature upside down.

There was GOOD NEWS: Most people are essentially unflappable. He discovered that humans are amazingly **resilient** against tragedy and **remarkably resistant** to radically positive change. “While things don't really change in life—they flow back and forth...the most important lesson is that life is a **process** that we need to enjoy and **experience** as it comes.

“There is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live.”

A recent commentator on Ecclesiastes said, “*By exploring the depths of failure and despair and arriving at a pervasive sense of the obscured, the author espouses a radical openness to life, a life lived without pretensions, and explorations without delusions of grandeur.*”

In the middle of the Old Testament there is a book, Ecclesiastes. We are not sure who is the author. Evidently an older man who has looked back at the lessons he has learned based on the evidence he has observed. He has examined every aspect of life, attempting to discern what lasts and endures. He doesn't try to give it a positive spin. The results are somber. Most of the book is consumed with

considering the results of human achievement. We work hard, we toil, we create, we plan and build and achieve, we record things in books, but...Ecclesiastes asks, "What does it all add up to?"

"Mostly vanity. Like the futility of striving after the wind."

Most people if they measured their accomplishment at work, would see themselves somewhere short of what they went to work hoping to be part of. One step forward and two steps back. You feel like you are pushing a boulder uphill. You keep doing it because you are afraid to let it go lest it race back down to the bottom and you have to start over again..

Ecclesiastes argues that our achievements ought to be enjoyed for their own sake,

for how they fill our days,

and how they celebrate our God given gifts for creativity and productivity.

I believe that everyone should be required to periodically follow preschool children around the park. Young children have 5-minute attention spans. They ride the swings, run over to the slide. The jump in the leaves, then walk on the balance beam, gaze mesmerized by a worm crawling across the sandbox. They love it all. They give rapt attention to the life right in front of them. Their incredible curiosity makes them want to soak up life as it exists.

A colleague of mine is a long time chaplain at a prominent East Coast university. He writes of his disappointment of what he calls the "**curse of careerism.**" It is an affliction that students arrive with on their first day as they are already polishing their resumes. They choose courses not because of interest or even talent but because they think taking the course will make their transcript look good.

They often take the easiest grading professor rather than one who will challenge them and make them grow. Because it will look better on the resume.

My colleague laments they are missing the most important experience of higher education: **the maturing of the critical capacities of the mind.** The simple joy of studying whatever it is—just because you will learn something and gain some insight into yourself.

The curse of careerism is transforming the college experience, which is almost exclusively viewed as the ticket to the middle class or higher. It is no longer seen as a way to be well rounded and more joyful. The curse of careerism is truly a folly because with the current explosion of information even the best degree in any field has a shelf life of about 18 months. You should go to college to "**learn how to learn.**" You are there to nurture an openness to what you can do creatively and in teamwork with others.

We have become such utilitarian, pragmatic people. We are driven by the seven golden words:

"What good will this do for me?"

Nineteen months ago I was packing up my office in New Jersey. I had collected books for over 20 years. To accommodate them I kept adding bookshelves. Then I shelved the books two deep with the old and seldom used ones in the back and the newer ones in front. After that capacity was reached, I

starting stuffing books in boxes and stacking them in enormous closets.

But I was moving. I am cheap and it costs fifty cents a pound to move them so I started to cull through the shelves. I had a rule: **If I had not read it or referred to it in 3 years**—it got tossed in the box going to the Seminary book drive. When I was done, more than half the books were in the throw away pile. These books, which cost me over \$5000, would be sold for \$200 and many just thrown away.

Some of the discards had been the definitive “**books of the year**” in their field of interest. I had loved reading them. I got great sermon material from them. Some of the authors put their life work into it. To think that their best efforts, the only thing that endures from their life's work, was now a faded, seldom read book buried behind newer covers. I thought, “What is the final destination of our greatest work? Might it be the used book store or the ash heap?”

Ecclesiastes tells us to live in the moment.

Serve and enjoy the people God has given you at this time and place.

Remember: We are not the person who pulls it together—even with our best intentions and plans. God somehow takes all our human efforts and weaves them into something great and eternal. In the end, all of this may count for something in God's gracious plan.

“There is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. Moreover it is Gods gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

Amen.