

Sermon: **Ecclesiastes 3: -14**  
Peace Church, Munich on July 29, 2008  
By Emily Zumpe

### **The Lord of Time / Living Like the Lillies**

Dear brothers and sisters. I want to start with a question – what have you done since you woke up this morning? Maybe you were awakened early by a screaming child or a snoring partner. Maybe you had to make breakfast for a big family, get everyone dressed and ready, and rush everyone out the door? Maybe you woke up alone, read a book in bed and realized too late that you had become totally absorbed in the story and were now running late for church? Did you have to run for the tram? Or bike like mad to make it on time? Have trouble picking out what to wear? Or maybe receive an important call that you just had to take, but which lasted a bit too long? If you are anything like me, regardless of how early I wake up, I am always in a hurry to make it to church on time. It seems like the clock goes simply ticks by faster on Sunday mornings....

Time is a big business in today's world. There are mobiles and hand-held-devices which are to carry all of our important information, numbers and appointments, and have alarms to keep us on time. Beauty products to turn back the clock are wildly popular – and expensive! In business, time management is a skill by which everyone is judged – the goal is to do everything faster, more efficiently and in less time. And if you don't have enough time in your job, your company may hire expensive consultants to teach you how to deal more effectively with your time. Time is something we try to maximize, optimize, steal, cheat, save and even slow down. But what is all the fuss about? Is time ours to own or plan in the first place? And if not, why this obsession with the passing of time?

Even during Old Testament times, people thought about and struggled with time. Our sermon text today is taken from the book of Ecclesiastes, one of a set of books including Proverbs called the Wisdom Literature, which are dated around the tenth century. The word Ecclesiastes has a complex origin – it is the Latin transcription of a Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qoheloth*, which literally means Preacher or Teacher. Many attribute this book to King Solomon, but others have argued that it was written much later by a wise teacher or learned man. Despite the uncertainty about its author or date of origin, however, this book was powerful and insightful enough to be included in the original collection of texts now known as the Bible. The origin remains unclear today, but the impact is undeniable.

When we look closely at this well-known passage, we first find 14 pairs of opposites: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to reap, and a time to sow... and so on. Please note that these are opposites, **not** results. One does not necessarily lead to the other. So why the number 14? Together, there are 28 states or stages of life addressed here, which correlates to the 28-day lunar cycle. Therefore some have argued that the 28 particulars remind us of the ebb and flow of life, the passing of time, the natural order of life on this earth. This is giving us a preview of the message to come: there is some design behind this world and the events which happen in it. It is also signaling that all things are changing in life. If we are mourning, we do not have to despair – the day of dancing will someday return. And if we are faithful to plant, we can be sure that we (or someone else) will have to invest further work in the harvest. No stage of life is permanent – all pain is temporary and all silence will someday cease, breaking out into shouts and songs.

One fascinating point to notice is that many of the pairs can be considered neutral. Is it positive or negative to scatter stones or gather them up? Do we despair or delight in being silent or speaking up? Is searching inspirational? Or depressing? And is giving up a sign of defeat, or a symbol of acceptance of the current situation? With these pairs, and many of the others, it depends on your stage in life and what is going on around you. Tearing down can be positive, as in tearing down racist stigmas or barriers to economic success. Throwing away can invigorate us – have you ever been surprised at how exhausted and delighted you can be after spending the day cleaning out your closet, garage, desk drawer or Inbox at work? The point here may be to encourage us to rethink our current situations. Professionals call this reframing, and many feel that the key to success in life is neither to lower your expectations or push yourself or others to fulfill them, but to completely re-evaluate how you define and measure success. If you are in an argument with someone, and are able to step back and evaluate the issue from their point of view, maybe your opinion will change about the conflict. Maybe you will realize that you are both on the same side of an issue – but using different words and ideas to express the same concepts, especially when these conflicts are motivated by fear or insecurity, which is often the case. If you stop accepting the world's definition of success and happiness, and begin to define for yourself what you need to be satisfied, the chances are very good that you will discover that you are actually much more happy than you had previously thought.

Without going into too much detail about each set of opposites, it is also interesting to note that the author often uses these constant changes to encourage and warn us about how we live our lives. Often, he or she begins with the more difficult side of the pair: a time to kill comes before a time to heal, tearing down often comes before building up. Sadness gives way to laughter, and if we are wrecked by

war, the time for peace is just around the corner. The author – the teacher or preacher – wants us to remember that times of trouble will not last forever. When we are battling with our own problems, disappointments, failures, losses, or fears, we can be 100% confident that soon, just like the tides, our luck will change. However, not all of the pairs begin with the more difficult element. If we are busy embracing and loving, we should also be aware that these states-of-being, like all states in life, are temporary. The goal of making this point is not to rob us of our joy, but to remind us not to get too used to the idea that everything is sunshine and lollipops. Even though we may be currently experiencing a rather sweet spot, we must remember that the sour times will return – God promised us joy, but He did not always promise us happiness. If we go through life expecting to always be happy – singing, dancing, laughing, loving, enjoying great harvests and peace – we will certainly be disappointed. If we want everything to always go our way, then we are just setting ourselves up for this disappointment, which may lead us to despair. Adam Clarke, a Bible scholar, calls this state, “becoming the authors of our own distresses.” In a way, we are then writing our own stories of failures and pain.

The author of Ecclesiastes asks in verse 9 if the struggle in life is futile or worthless, then. “What does the worker gain from his toil?” Translated in our current day situation, this means, why labor, if someone else may enjoy the fruits of my hard work? Why be kind to others if they can always turn around to hurt me? Why risk loving someone else when they can reject me? Why fight for peace and justice when wars will continue to flare? And the answer to these questions comes quickly and clearly in verse 11: no, life is not worthless. Quite the contrary: “(God) has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set the world in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” If He has created

everything to be fitting, appropriate and beautiful – that is to say, pleasing, right – in its own time, then we must admit that we have not yet grasped his concept of time. We wrestle with why suffering exists, we can rarely delight in pain or see the sense in wars or troubles. Even in other people, we often fail to see the beauty – that is the value, worth and perfection – that God has created. But even though our understanding of his timing is limited, God has left us with a reminder of his steadfast nature – a symbol of his covenant to love us and be with us during the storms of life. He has set our hearts on the world, which is a word always used in the Old Testament to mean eternity. God has placed eternity in our hearts – even when life is tough, the eternal remains unchanging and will steady us. Focusing on His will, His way may calm the storms which we are all required to face. And this small sign of the eternal should spur us on to further seek God, to understand his influence in our lives, to stand in wonder of His perfect design.

So what should we do in this life, if we can't control or change what happens in our time? Verses 12 and 13 give a clear message: "I know there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God." In the turbulent seas of life, God does not ask us to buckle down and study His word or attempt to fathom the depths of his mind. He does commission us to sink into the depths of a search, which He knows will be fruitless on this earth. No, God tells us to eat, drink and be merry – enjoy the blessings He has already given you and will continue to give you. Be kind to others, share His love. And do not be too hard on yourselves – be proud of your accomplishments. How many of us can truly say that we are satisfied with our work? Most of us tend to highlight our own mistakes, pointing out where we have failed ourselves or others, be it personally, professionally or spiritually. We are quick to feel

guilty about how we spend our time, how little we accomplish in a day or a week, or how much our hard work fails to produce the result we desired. Rather than focusing on our successes, we dwell on our shortcomings and failures. But this is not what God desires for us. He wants us to enjoy his perfect and beautiful creation. He wants us to get out of the house and get going – doing good works and sharing His love. God's instruction is clear: Embrace life.

But many of us have trouble embracing life because we are bogged down with worry. We worry about what we'll eat, what to wear, where to live and what job to do. We worry about being successful, meeting our goals and managing our time. And the ironic thing is, God is clearly saying here that time is not ours to worry about. Time will come and go, the sun gives way to the moon, who moves back over for the sun. And all things are changing. The only thing which remains the same is God. In verse 14, the author confirms this by saying, "I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will honor Him." In sort, God doesn't need our help. He's already got everything – our lives, our schedules, our successes and failures – all figured out. And His timing is perfect. So rather than fighting a useless battle against time, against our ideas about what should be happening when and how, God encourages us to trust in His perfect timing. And His perfect will for our lives. As Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us, (God) has plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future." When we stop trying to spec out this future, to help God understand what we want and what we have planned, we may begin to see that His is already working, and has always been working, in our lives for our own good. Trust is not easy, but it is much better to learn to trust than to fight a race against time that we are destined to lose.

So let's remember the lilies in the reading from Luke today – they are beautiful, fulfilling God's purpose in life with no worries. Let's reframe the way we look at time. Let's redeem time - stop rushing around, which will not alter the amount of time we are granted in this life, and take time to appreciate the beauty of God's creation. Let's all strive to live life like the lilies – in submission to God's perfect will for our lives, eating, drinking, being satisfied with our work and doing good towards others. Then we may honor God and through Him be a blessing to others.

Amen.