

“From Time to Time”

Sermon from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Given Sunday, July 11, 2021

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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*There is a time for everything,
a season for every purpose under heaven:
a season to be born and a season to die;
a season to plant and a season to harvest;
a season to hurt and a season to heal;
a season to tear down and a season to build up;
a season to cry and a season to laugh;
a season to mourn and a season to dance;
a season to scatter stones and a season to gather them;
a season for holding close and a season for holding back;
a season to seek and a season to lose;
a season to keep and a season to throw away;
a season to tear and a season to mend;
a season to be silent and a season to speak;
a season to love and a season to hate;
a season for hostilities and a season for peace.*

—

Maya Moore’s teammates and colleagues in the WNBA miss her. And they want the world to know what a big deal it is that she stepped away from basketball when she did. Renee Montgomery played with Moore for the Minnesota Lynx, and looking back over the two years that Moore’s been out of the game, instead devoting her time to pursuing justice for a wrongly imprisoned family friend, Montgomery said, “I hope it

never gets lost in the shuffle that she probably could have four more championships by now, three more MVP titles.”

Sue Bird, who plays for Seattle, said Moore is a “generational talent.” Said, “I could tell you that we’re gonna miss her on this Olympic team, and we’ve missed her on the national team the last couple of years, without a doubt; she’s that good. But if someone feels that strongly that they need to do something, for their own well-being need to do it, who are any of us to question that?”

She hasn’t retired from the game that she’s loved her whole life, starting from when her mom hung a hoop over the back of the door in their apartment when Moore was three years old. But this isn’t her season to play.

There’s a time to pursue her sport, and a time to pursue justice. And when she met Jonathan Irons, a man locked up in her hometown whom she became convinced was innocent, she knew she was emerging into a new time, a new era of her own life.

Irons was sixteen when he was put in prison for fifty years. He’d been tried as an adult, but not allowed to testify at his own hearing because he was so young. There was no blood or DNA or fingerprint evidence tying him to the crime scene, only a reported confession that happened in a conversation the

officer had no recording of, and had torn up and thrown away his notes from.

Moore has always loved basketball but when she met Irons, when she heard this story, it was against the backdrop of the racial reckoning of the last few years, and her team had been actively supporting the Black Lives Matter movement; she'd been using her own platform and influence as an athlete to make good trouble, to bring positive change. People were hearing her. And she decided to focus in on a tangible, hopefully redeemable wrong - how this one life had been treated. She said she remembered those who had made a difference for her - her grandparents, others who had poured time and energy and attention into her. She said she learned from them that "impact is not just about going far and wide. Impact is more about the narrow and the deep." So she dove in.

And she learned and she worked and she fought and today he is free, and she has drawn more people into the work, and more people are being set free. It's time for that.

Some changes are a lot smaller than this.

On my wall hangs a patchwork tree, sewn onto a piece of creamy linen fabric. It was a gift from a friend of mine, who also has two boys, stair-stepped in age with mine. The trunk is made from a piece of a brown jumper we passed back and

forth when our boys were young, depending on who it would fit at the time. The leaves are varied - some in green corduroy, some a different shade of green, a flat cotton with little flowers printed on it, some are a white pattern with tiny red bunnies hopping across, a few are from a pale shirt with happy brown-and-white dogs chasing each other around it. All of these clothes served our four boys - the jumpsuit was actually a hand-me-down when I got it, so it'd seen lots of life even before them - and now they've all been torn, and mended; they've all been cut, and sewn - into something new. There is a season for functionality, and a season for beauty and memory. Narrow and deep.

There is possibility for transformation, in both big and small ways, all around us, all the time. It just takes looking at what is, and imagining what might be - and knowing, acknowledging, that that new thing will also be transformed. At Bible Study Friday we talked about cycles of chaos and order, and the idea that lots of folks find this scripture depressing because of its assertion of cyclical truth. Life isn't linear, it tells us, we like to believe that it is, that we start somewhere, you know, not great, and moving always forward, always in a straight line, to something better, something ultimately wonderful. That's not the way of the world, this scripture tells us. We win and we lose. We remember and we forget. We love and we don't. These aren't good or bad, they're just true. And as we live these cycles, things change. So we go from chaos to order, and then

what emerges is a new chaos - and then a new order. None the same as what came before, but all shaped by it...

We've seen this recently, as we emerge from the pandemic. There's been a time for isolation and a time to re-engage with community. A time for naming all that's been lost and a time for counting all that we've come to know in a new way. When someone asks how we are, there's probably a time to fake a smile, to say we're making it through, and there's a time to tell the whole story. Better yet, there's a time to acknowledge that the fullness of the story maybe can't ever be told, and to hold the silence of that truth together. There is a time to work toward something different so that our souls might thrive, and a time to let be what is, so that our souls might heal.

And maybe there are some things there just is no time for. This is the difficulty with this scripture, right? Is there really a time to kill, a time to hate, a time for war? Was there once? Was there ever a time for an innocent person to be imprisoned? Can we say it's not that time anymore? Can we refuse to cycle back to it?

Pete Seeger did an interview with the Smithsonian Folkways project fifteen years ago, and he remembered how profoundly these words affected his life forty years before that. He said, "I didn't realize, when I improvised a melody to a short poem in the Old Testament that these few words would be some of the

most important words I ever would latch on to... all I did was improvise a melody to it, but I found myself singing this more and more.” He said, “It explains why, tens of thousands of years ago, if you weren’t a good killer, you didn’t live. In fact, you and I wouldn’t be here,” he said, “if our ancestors hadn’t been good killers. The ones who were not good killers didn’t have descendants. Now, in this present time, when foolish scientists have made it possible for us to wipe each other off the face of the earth, now we’ve got to look for a different part of our tradition. The part which was developed when our ancestors learned how to build a council fire. When they sat around that fire and made life and death decisions: do we stay here and starve, or risk moving into someone else’s territory and have to fight for our lives? Do we expel somebody from our community for doing something absolutely immoral?” He said, “So they had to make life and death decisions around a council fire, and this talking is what we have to do in the world now. We may disagree with each other, we may feel like shouting with each other, but we must lower our voices and ask ourselves: how can we say what needs to be said, without making them so angry that they walk out?”

He’s suggesting that this song, that has this resonance with each of our individual lives, and, maybe we’re seeing now with our communal life, might also have something to say about the eras of human existence. It may be that who we once were is not who we always will be – both each of us, and all of us. And

there is sadness in that, and celebration. Our lives hold all of that.

I wonder, is there a season to move away from a scripture that tells us there's a season for hate, for killing, for war? Is there a season to write something new? Is there a season to say enough is enough and we will no longer turn to those parts of our tradition that justify our greed, our violence, that excuse the worst of who we have been? Maybe these are the times to turn away from those parts of our tradition, to turn toward the challenge of creating something that fits better the people we understand ourselves to be called by God to be for this day, trusting that in all of it, God holds us.

Amen.