

2021-08-15 A New Season

A New Season

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Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

And now I'm going to send it over to Ville for our pre-sermon reading.

[Voice of Ville Anttila]

Hello, Artisan friends. It's so nice to be with you this morning and afternoon. Let's turn to our second reading, Ecclesiastes chapter three verses one to eight:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you so much. It's nice to hear your voice and see your face, and good afternoon to you too, Ville. I want to begin the sermon today as I have often done with a question for you. I am in Zoom here and I'm going to be able to monitor the chat a little bit better than I usually can, but I can't monitor what's in the room. By the way, if you're just joining us, I'm joining remotely. I'm just at my house just over the hill from Artisan there. Since I did some traveling and attended a couple of outdoor concerts this past week, I figured, just to be on the very extremely safe side with an abundance of caution and all that stuff, to be part of worship from my house today instead of from in the sanctuary with most of you.

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But here's the question. And I'm gonna have to ask somebody who's both connected to the chat and can see the room to show me what happens with a show of hands when I ask for it. And if you're in Zoom, you can just type a one-word answer. The question is: what is your least favorite season of the year? I don't want to know what your favorite one is, this is not a time for warm fuzzy feelings. This is the one that you hate [laughs]. Which season do you like the least? Okay, so for those of you in the room, you can just do a show of hands. The first responses in Zoom chat were winter, so let's start with that. For how many of you in the room is winter your favorite or your least favorite season? [Hands are raised]. Right. What about summer? Somebody said summer. How many in the room think summer is your least favorite season? [Hands raised] Okay. The Zoom people are raising their hands too, I love this. What about spring? Whose least favorite is spring? [Hands raised] And then, finally, okay, look—you can even do a raise hand feature in Zoom. This is so fun! I haven't been on Zoom in a long time for worship, so this is so much fun for me. And what's the last one? Nobody's least favorite season is fall, right? [Some laugh in congregation].

Okay, so somebody told me that almost 50 percent of the room dislikes winter the most. I have news for you, my friends. You, like I, live in the wrong city to dislike winter [laughs]. It sort of raises the question though, like, what is a season? Somebody said “fool's spring” in the chat. I think it was Brian said it was his least favorite season. That's a made up one. I think it was Kurt Vonnegut who famously said, “There aren't four seasons of the year. There's six or eight.” That's a really fascinating idea to think about, how we've divided the year into quarters, but that's not necessarily where the weather breaks. And if you think of seasons mostly about weather, I encourage you to go look up Kurt Vonnegut's definition of the different seasons, I think it's really fun.

But of course, we could think about seasons in a metaphorical or figurative way too, couldn't we? A season is just a long stretch of time where aspects of our way of life are grouped together, and it might be about weather, it might be about the date, but it can also be about things that are going on in our life. So maybe you've heard somebody say or maybe you've said yourself, “I'm going through a really tough season right now,” or, “This has been a really fruitful season for my business.” We use that language for a lot of different things. So last week, if you were with us you know that I kicked off a new sermon series called “The New Normal” with an asterisk, right? And the asterisk was because the new normal is not normal, and it's also not new. And of course, the new normal is one of those COVID era expressions that we're all super tired of hearing. But at the same time, I think it carries some meaning for us because we all kind of recognize that the world is already feeling pretty different in some ways, and that's probably

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going to continue — that the world is going to feel different when kids go back to school in a few weeks than it did even last year. So, there is some newness, both good and bad, to the season that we're in now. And it doesn't feel normal.

At the same time though, even as our circumstances change dramatically, as people of faith we proceed through life thinking of ourselves as part of the family of God. God who was with us in the past, and will be with us in the future, and most importantly, is with us right now in this season and in this day. And that combination of newness and oldness, and of normal and abnormal — we need to navigate that together as a community. And that's what this series is meant to be about. Not necessarily what I think about all this, but about how we as a community are navigating this reality together.

So last week we started off thinking about a new day, and today the topic is a new season. And then next two weeks I'm going to be talking about a new life, and a new truth. That's where things maybe get a little bit heavier. So I encourage you to come back or to listen through. So a few minutes ago when Ville read that Bible passage from the book of Ecclesiastes, did you hear this song in the back of your head, anybody else hear the song? It's that one that goes... [plays audio of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" by The Byrds] right? I hope that you could hear that. I could hear it. I was jamming out [laughs]. So, the fun thing about that song is that pretty much everybody who's been alive in America since 1965 has heard a particular passage of the Bible. And those verses come from chapter three of the book of Ecclesiastes, and I know that you've heard those verses, whether it's just in song or whether you've studied them somehow as a Bible reader, but I doubt that most of you have read the entire book of Ecclesiastes. I would recommend that you do. It's a *really* interesting book. It's really quite something.

So, this passage that we read today feels very nice and warm and it's just kind of very gentle and says for everything under heaven, there's a time, and there's a time for this and a time for that. Here's some other stuff that appears in the book. The author says, "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity," and then, "All things are wearisome, more than one can express." And this cheerful note: "The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them." And that's just the first chapter. [Laughter] So, I encourage you to read it, and to remember as you read it that it's not the end of the story with God and God's people, but it is a chapter, a book, if you will, in the story. Now you could read the book of Ecclesiastes and find all of the stuff that's in there, most of which sounds like the things I just quoted and not like the passage that Ville read, and you might be tempted to view this book as a very cynical bit of literature. And I'll be honest, as a person who is myself somewhat cynical at times, the Book of Ecclesiastes definitely scratches an itch for me. It sort of

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affirms a certain part of my personality that doesn't always get a chance to be affirmed. And the truth is, the book probably is at least a little bit cynical and, and for me it's really interesting to stop and appreciate that this perspective exists among God's people. And that not only does it exist, but it somehow made it into our Bibles.

Sometimes I stop and think about the chances that certain bits of the Bible would get into the Bible if the gatekeepers of Christianity were making that decision today. Whew! We'd have a very thin Bible, I think. There's some stuff that I wouldn't necessarily want to have in there, if I'm being honest. But you could read the book of Ecclesiastes as a cynical piece of literature. And you might not be wrong, but I also read this book as very contemplative and very grounded. It's very awake to the present in a way that I think is quite inspiring and profound.

You might remember what I said last week about how this series, "The New Normal" came about for me. I was spending some time in my office, studying and sort of prayerfully considering what would come next in the season of life and I looked up at my chalkboard where I had written out a quotation from Father Richard Rohr that defines contemplation as "a long, loving look at what is." I'm probably going to return to that throughout this series because it really was the impetus for it. A long loving look at what *is*. Not a look at what you wish were true, but to look at what *is* true. Not a look at what you might hope is true in the future but what is true in the present. Not dwelling on what was true in the past. A long and loving look at what is, being present in the moment.

And that to me is really what these verses from Ecclesiastes three are trying to say to us, that there is a time for everything that happens in human existence. And some of it is good and some is bad, and some of it is neutral, but there's a time for all of human experience to happen.

Now, I fully acknowledge that this is cold comfort, and maybe even an infuriating observation for you to hear me making, if you are right now in the middle of one of the worst times of your life. Nobody wants to hear a pastor or a teacher – and, by the way, the book of Ecclesiastes is written by someone who describes themselves as "The Teacher" – and nobody wants to hear a pastor or a teacher, when things are really bad, saying, "Just be present in the moment and accept that there's a time for everything that happens in life," right? I get it, that nobody wants to hear those words. But I do think this is a spiritual truth that runs somewhat universally through all kinds of religious traditions, including our own, that staying present in the moment and trying to process our experiences, without judgment, and without dwelling overlong on how things used to be or how things might be in the future, that that is a deeply spiritual skill to practice.

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And in classic spiritual direction (and you've heard me talk about this before), the question is: Where do you and how do you experience God in this moment right now? Right? Which, by the way, is a wonderful replacement for the question that we are first given to ask in moments of crisis, which is: Why is God letting this happen or why is God doing this to me? Right?

But a very quick theology aside: For what it's worth, I don't think that God causes everything that happens, specifically, right? There's a difference between "there is a time for everything that happens" and "everything that happens is because God, you know, made that specific thing happen right at that time." That's a debate that's been going on for centuries; that's where I land on it, and I find the world makes more sense that way. You can think about that the way you wish. But either way, I would encourage you to replace the question, "Why is this happening?" (if God loves me, etc.) with the question, "Where is God, in this moment?", because there's no agreed-upon answer to the first question, but there are infinite answers to the second question.

So, as we think about seasons of life and imagining a new season that we're moving into together, I thought it might be helpful to think about characters from the Bible – Jesus's disciples. Imagine, say, let's take Peter, one of the "top disciples", right? Imagine the seasons of life that Peter went through as a follower of God, and then a follower of Jesus. He had lived his whole life as a faithful Jew, right? So, there were probably ups and downs throughout that life, but that was a good long season of the world making sense in a particular way, religiously. And then, Peter was called by an itinerant rabbi and he followed him; that was definitely a change of seasons. And then he witnessed many miracles and even himself ended up walking on water! That one experience was probably a whole season for Peter; it would have been for me.

And then he became something of a zealot for Jesus, and swore he would never leave him and never deny him or betray him. And then he denied Jesus three times in one night, and soon after that saw Jesus crucified. And *then* he had an experience with the resurrected Jesus, right? Seems like, for Peter, many single days in his life could have been entire seasons, because of the shift in understanding that would have been required.

Soon, he became a leader in the early days of the Christian church; that was a season. He had to come to grips with the idea that this Jewish sectarian movement was now going to be inclusive of the Gentiles. That was a season. That and other things got him in trouble with the authorities, and eventually he faced his own death at the hands of those authorities. So, just

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looking at Peter's experience, you can see all of these dramatic changes that occurred along the way. He must have felt like he'd lived 1,000 seasons with God by the time of his death.

And you could do this with any of the disciples, by the way. Anybody who has a significant story arc in scripture, you could look at them – I encourage you to look at a character and just say, "Wow, how many different seasons did this character go through?" It's not a normal way of thinking about a Bible character, but it's a really interesting one, I think. Take John the Baptist, who had his own whole movement, all kinds of disciples of his own, and then he ended up pointing them towards Jesus. Talk about a change in season!

Or Paul, who not only had changes of seasons, but a change of name (originally was Saul), and started out condemning Christians to death, and then ended up converting himself and spreading the faith around the known world. And the story in the book of Acts talks about that whole expansion of Christianity; Paul is a central figure in that story, and if you were to read the book of Acts with an eye toward the changing seasons in Paul's life, I bet you'd have a really rich experience in doing that.

And on and on it goes. Each one of Jesus's followers would have had to navigate what it means and what it meant to follow him through changing seasons, through what must have sometimes felt like tectonic shifts in their understanding of their religion, and of their very being. And just when they had adjusted to one new season that it started to feel normal, there was suddenly a new normal, and then another one, and then another one. And maybe by the end of their lives they might have come to the place of being able to accept that there is no normal, that the only constant is change. Well, change, and then one other very important fact.

If you were to read the book of Matthew – the Gospel of Matthew, that's one of the four stories of Jesus's ministry in the Bible, the Gospel of Matthew – the very last words recorded by that author were words that were spoken by Jesus himself. He'd been raised from the dead, which is probably the most "new normal" thing that could ever happen. (Could you imagine Jesus appearing before his disciples, risen from the dead, and saying, "We just need to pivot to a new normal, gang." [chuckles]) And what he did is he gathered them together, and he said these profound words: "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." To the end of the age! So, no matter how many seasons we get, no matter how many times the world might be flipped on its head in our lifetime, no matter how abnormal things feel right now, or at any point in the future, there is one truth that will never change. And it's the truth that Jesus spoke to his disciples – maybe you

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can imagine him speaking it to you right now – “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

That's a truth that's not new at all, and it's also a truth that's new every morning. Speaking of every morning, last week I asked you to imagine waking up to a new day with God. This week, I want you to imagine that the seasons are changing, spiritually. We know that the seasons are changing in other ways. I woke up to a 55-degree morning this morning; the windows were open and the air was just slightly crisp. It was wonderful; you could tell that Fall was on the way, but it's still going to be in the mid-70s today. It's like a perfect day, and just the beginning of the change of season. We know that the metaphorical and figurative seasons are changing, too. I got a letter this week, having students in the Rochester City School District, about what their practices and policies are going to be when kids go back to school. That's going to be a new season.

I want you to imagine that the seasons are changing in your spiritual life. Maybe they are; it often does coincide with other types of seasonal changes. But with each passing season, I think it's useful to think about what we have experienced and what is coming next, and then kind of put those things together and think about how we can live intentionally in each moment. And I think our current moment calls for that kind of reflection and that kind of intention.

So, spiritually speaking for you, and for us as a community, what do you perceive are the markers of the season changing? What's the spiritual equivalent of a little chill in the air, or of the leaves changing, or of something blossoming up out of the cold ground? People of God, what will our next season be?

I'm not going to ask you to turn and share this with your neighbor, so don't worry, but if I were going to ask you a question to share with your neighbor, it would be: If you could sum up your perception of this next coming season in one word, what would it be? Even though I'm not going to ask you to share that with anybody, I'm going to give you just a minute to reflect on it quietly. What word would you choose, if I asked you to come up with one word, to describe your perception of what the next season of spiritual life is going to be? I didn't do this exercise myself in advance, but as I was standing here thinking about it, the next word that I have in my notes to speak to you is probably the word that I would choose: *remember*. Jesus said, “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

May it be so. Amen.

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[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).