**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC 7/19/15**

***For Everything There Is a Season***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP**

Good morning. Our worship theme for today is a quote from the third chapter of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, “For Everything There Is a Season.” So this morning, we are beginning our time together with a reading of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 as our Responsive Call to Worship.

**PRELUDE**

In the late 1950’s, Pete Seeger took these very words from Ecclesiastes, and set them to music. Pete Seeger called his song “For Everything There Is a Season,” and it was moderately successful. Then in 1965 a folk rock group called the Byrds recorded the song under the title, “Turn, Turn, Turn,” and it became an international hit single, number 1 in the USA and number 3 in Canada.

**OPENING SONG**

Our Opening Song of the seasons this morning is by the late, great Irving Berlin: “Blue Skies, Smiling at Me.” Please stand, as you are able and comfortable standing, as we honor God’s beautiful “Blue Skies” that come and chase the gray away, every season of the year.

**MUSIC MEDITATION**

In the Music Meditation for today, we travel from the every-season “Blue Skies” of Irving Berlin to season-specific “Summertime” from Porgy and Bess, with lyrics by Dubose Heyward and music by George Gershwin.

**GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 6:30-34

This is a story about Jesus’ reaction to the great crowds that are following him and his apostles, hardly giving them a moment’s peace.

**SERMON**

The Old Testament author of Ecclesiastes, who refers to himself as “the Preacher,” has a lesson for us, a lesson that we might well heed: “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.”

For in our early twenty-first century, as opposed to Old Testament times, thousands of years ago, we don’t really experience the passing of time, and particularly the four seasons, as people once experienced them. With universal air-conditioning, our summers are cool and are often downright cold. And in the winters, with central heating, good heaters in our cars, and down coats and jackets, most of us face the realities of Old Man Winter for minutes a day rather than for hours.

I must admit that I find the seasons of spring and fall are delightful, as transition times, when we enjoy “the change of season,” with no need for furnace or air-conditioning. Fall and spring are the seasons that many cherish.

In the old days we were cold in winter and hot in summer, breathing a sigh of relief when spring and fall dropped in to sit and visit for a spell. The changing seasons meant something else to previous generations besides discomfort, a change in activities. Once we were tied to God’s good earth. We were part of the earth: planting crops in spring, tending them in the summer, harvesting in fall, resting and planning for planting in the winter. Like Adam and Eve, we knew that we came from the earth and that to the earth we would return.

Then with industrialization and migration to the cities and suburbs, the seasons have meant less to us or at the least the seasons have less of an impact on our daily lives. Except in the home. When women were homemakers and perhaps for some, even if they worked outside of the home, each day was spoken for. Each day was its own season and had its own routine. Each day provided “time for every matter under heaven.”

Do you remember back when

Monday was Wash Day ~

Tuesday was Ironing Day ~

Wednesday was Sewing Day ~

Thursday was Market Day ~

Friday was Cleaning Day ~

Saturday was Baking Day ~

And Sunday was the Day of Rest?

I believe that my grandmother Barrett, who was a widow with nine children, followed that schedule. And I’ll tell you this: everything was shipshape in her home!

Today though, for many of us, the tasks of daily living are all mixed together. We may shop every day of the week, clean as little as possible, bake or buy baked goods for holidays, and use Sunday as a day to get all those undone things done --- before Monday rolls around again.

I am not suggesting that we go back to rigid schedules and turn off the heat in winter and the air-conditioning in summer. But I am suggesting that we become more deliberate in our activities, depending on the season of the year and what that particular season uniquely offers to us. What can we do in the winter that celebrates the cold and snow? (That is, if we have not migrated to Florida!) What can we do in the summer that we can do at no other time? How can we more fully appreciate the changing colors and warmth of spring, and as summer ends, the quickly falling temperatures and brightly falling leaves of autumn?

Using each of the four seasons for what it can bring us is worth pondering, for this will bring us closer to God’s good creation. The answers to what the seasons can bring will be different for each of us, depending on our circumstances. Some of us will ski or snowboard down virgin snow, and others will feed the birds that share the winter snow at home with us.

In previous generations --- before the advent of labor saving machines --- washing, ironing, sewing, marketing, cleaning and baking, especially in large households like my grandmother’s, would each take the better part of a day, especially if you didn’t have help. But even today, with machines, establishing weekly routines can be good, helping us to avoid becoming overwhelmed by so much to do or underwhelmed by putting things off. Weekly routines might help us accomplish what we need to accomplish in a timely fashion. For everything there is a season.

In the Gospel for today Jesus shows that he is a good and caring shepherd of people, a shepherd for the crowd for whom he has compassion, teaching them many things. Closer to home, Jesus shows that he is a good and caring shepherd for his followers, his apostles. (Apostles are Jesus’ first twelve disciples plus those women and men who joined Jesus later in his ministry.)

When the apostles whom Jesus had sent out two by two come back and gather around Jesus, telling him all that they had done and taught, Jesus doesn’t ask for more details and suggest that they work harder and increase their quota. Jesus doesn’t give the apostles any tips on healing, nor does he tell them some new and memorable parables.

What Jesus says to the apostles shows his love for them and for all of us: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”

*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile. For many were coming and going, and Jesus and his apostles had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.* (Mark 6:31-32)

“No leisure even to eat.” Have you ever been that busy? A lot of people are so busy or think they are so busy, that they grab lunch at their desk or skip lunch and continuing working. Jesus knows and understands the great benefits of going off to a quiet place, perhaps even to a deserted place, and “resting a while.”

Jesus knows that in the first chapter of Genesis in the great Creation story, God creates the world and all of its creatures in six days. The next chapter of Genesis, Chapter Two, begins with these words about the seventh day:

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work which he had done* *So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on the seventh day God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.* (Genesis 2:1-3)

Jesus knows this story of Creation, and he is living it with his disciples. Yet even they may be so busy that they don’t take the entire Sabbath day to rest. When Jesus heals on the Sabbath, he is criticized. Jesus responds by saying that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath, meaning that gifts of love, gifts of healing, are permitted on the Sabbath, even though it is a day of rest.

In addition to the Creation story, Jesus knows the Ten Commandments that Moses received from God. Jesus pays particular attention to the fourth commandment: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.” (Deuteronomy 5:12) And Jesus adds, “With deeds of love.”

Yet in the Gospel Witness for today we don’t see Jesus sitting down, relaxing, eating with his disciples in some quiet, deserted place. Oh no. Right after the verse about Jesus and the apostles going away in the boat by themselves, Mark wrtites,

*Now many people saw Jesus and the apostles going and recognized them, and these people hurried to the other side of the lake on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of Jesus and the apostles.* (6:33)

When Jesus goes ashore, he doesn’t tell the people who are expectantly waiting there to go home or to sit down and leave them alone for awhile, that he and his apostles need to rest. Jesus is Jesus, and so the story continues: *As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

The importance for us in what is happening here lies between the lines. I see Jesus sending his apostles away from the crowd, telling the apostles to go and have something to eat and rest awhile in a deserted place, while he covers the crowd, teaching them many things by himself. For after all, this is Jesus’ identity: he is the man for others. He lives so that we might get the help and rest we need.

And on this Sunday, when we are considering that “For everything there is a season,” it is important for us to think about our need for Sabbath, our need for rest.

Think about it: the Genesis Creation story tells us that God rests; the Ten Commandments teach us to observe the Sabbath; Jesus teaches how to honor the Sabbath and gives his followers time to relax and eat; the season of winter gives the earth a break under a mantle of white; and the old-fashioned homemaker finally gets a day of rest on Sunday.

So we might well consider our use of Sunday or another day. How can we make a Sabbath that is different from our other days if it isn’t that different already? What can we do to rest? Is there a way to rest creatively and grow spiritually? What can we do for God on the Sabbath? How can we show gratitude for all we have been given? What can we do for others?

For those of us who worship every week, it wouldn’t be Sunday without going to Church, and going to West Center Church in particular. Going to church is our routine and it is more than a routine. At its best, church gives us a time to sit and think, an opportunity to be renewed in spirit and perhaps even to be inspired, inspired to think, say or do something different, something new.

We observe the Sabbath on Sunday morning, and by so doing we keep the Sabbath holy, but what do we do the rest of the day, after we walk out the door? What do we take with us from church for the rest of the week? This is worth pondering.

And then there is one last way we can look at the seasons. We can look at time, our own time. We can look at the seasons of life: Spring might be ages 1-30. Summer, ages 31-60, Autumn, ages 61-90, and Winter, age 91 on to eternity.

And like the seasons on the calendar, each season of life presents its delights and its disasters: there are cherry blossoms, and there are floods in spring; ocean breezes and heat waves in summer; maple leaves of scarlet and killing frosts of white in autumn; dancing snowflakes and blinding blizzards in winter.

Life is not simple. Life is complex. We are not simple. We are complex.

Life is a series of opposites: there is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to reap, a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep silence and a time to speak, a time for war and a time for peace.

Walt Whitman wrote in his poem “Song of Myself,” “I am large. I contain multitudes.”

And so are we all.

May each and all of us find ways to delight in the present season, whatever it is, and may we bear its burdens too, finding the time and taking the time to live both deliberately and spontaneously.

May we find ways to accomplish all that we think we need to do or find ways to shorten the list of “to do’s” and use that time to enjoy more of life each day.

May we also design a Sabbath day that is pleasing to God, as we have come to know God, a day that is restorative, inspiring and loving, as God restores, inspires and loves us.

Amen.

**SONG OF RESPONSE** “September Song” by Kurt Weil

From “Summertime,” when the living is easy, we move now to the transitional month of September, “When the days dwindle down to a precious few.”

**THE CALL FOR THE OFFERING**

The Offertory song for this morning is “The Circle Game” by Joni Mitchell. The song tells the story of a boy’s life from his tenth year to his twentieth. We are invited to join in singing the chorus: “And the seasons they go round and round, and the painted ponies go up and down. We’re captive on the carousel of time. We can’t return, we can only look behind from where we came, and go round and round and round in the circle game.”

**CLOSING SONG**

Our Closing Song this morning takes us from autumn to winter. Yet this is not “The Winter of our Discontent.” Oh no! This is a “Winter Wonderland.” Let’s go walking!

**POSTLUDE**

And after enjoying a “Winter Wonderland,” what do we look forward to next? That’s right, those “April Showers” that come our way!

**POSTPOSTLUDE**  “Seasons of Love” by John Larson from Rent

“For Everything There Is a Season of Love.”

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