1-8-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Eccl 3:1-8, Jer 31:31-34 A Time To Be Renewed First UMC Springboro

I used to scoff at the phrase, “time goes faster the older you get.” Not anymore!

It reminds me of the following poem:

When as a child I laughed and wept, time crept.

When as a youth I dreamed and talked, time walked.

When I became a full grown man, time ran.

And later as I older grew, time flew.

Soon I shall find while traveling on, time gone.

--Source Unknown sermonillustrations.com:time

The New Year always brings out the nostalgic in me. I think of memories from years gone by.

I wonder how time has flown so fast. I reflect on the year past- the blessings, the struggles, the failures, the hopes not yet fulfilled. 2016 was a year of travel for me—to sing at the opening worship of General Conference in Portland. To experience the global nature of the church while in Texas. To move “back home” to southwest Ohio.

Many people will write off 2016 as a year of turmoil due to senseless violence, a presidential election, and I would add the struggles of our denomination at General Conference.

Yet, there were some high points in the past year. Births and marriages continued. Our community rallied around Mac Reese. Together we navigated a pastoral transition.

When I reflect on the year past and look ahead to the year to come, often I will find myself drawn to the words of Ecclesiastes: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” There is a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to break down, and a time to build up, a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time for silence, and a time to speak. Ecclesiastes lists 28 different seasons of life- Some we anticipate experiencing, and some we would rather not experience. Some that are painful, and some that move beyond the pain.

The older I get, the faster time flies, the more I come to appreciate this passage that calls us to recognize that all of these seasons of life, and many others we could list, are all part of being human, just as winter snow and summer heat are part of the seasons of nature. We may or may not like the season of life in which we may now find ourselves, yet whether we like it or not it is a part of life. Birth and death, doubt and hope, grief and joy are all a part of life. For everything there is a season.

Yet- in whatever season we may find ourselves we are called to recognize that God is present with us. The story of Emmanuel, God with us, is not just a story to be told once a year on Christmas Eve with candlelight and Silent Night. The story of Emmanuel, God with us, is a story just beginning in the manger, a story that continues through every time and every season of our lives.

Think back to this past year—When did you see God in the midst of the seasons of your life? What was God teaching you or showing you in that time? When did you praise God for God’s promises and presence? When did you fail to look for God in the midst of everyday life?

God is present with us throughout every season of our lives.

Yet there are times when we fail to be present to God. We get caught up in the busyness of life and neglect God’s Word or forget to pray. Illness, schedules or even apathy keeps us away from worship and fellowship within the community of faith. In those times of life, it becomes time to be renewed—to make new again our faith in God and commitment to Christ.

We do so today by considering the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah calls us to remember that we are forgiven, that God’s new covenant will be written on our hearts, that we are God’s people.

Keep in mind that Jeremiah was a prophet speaking for God during some of the darkest days of our faith history—the Babylonian exile. Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians. Judah had been carried away by the Babylonians. All visible signs of God’s covenant with God’s people were gone- the Temple lay in ruins, the Ark of the Covenant was no more, and the people were no longer in the Promised Land. Many Jews in exile were wondering if their destruction was God’s final words of judgment and whether or not God’s faithfulness to God’s people and God’s upholding of the faith covenants would still continue. It was a time of deep doubt and dark despair.

For years Jeremiah had been speaking God’s word of judgment and condemnation, words that reminded the people of God that once again they had rebelled against God and were paying for their sins. Yet in today’s text Jeremiah offered words of hope and restoration rather than doom and gloom. Jeremiah suddenly began to speak God’s words of promise, and he began to assure the people in exile that judgment was **not** God’s final word.

So today we hear Jeremiah proclaiming God’s word of hope and restoration.

“This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I’ll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I’ll forget they ever sinned!”

In order to understand the importance of this new covenant, recall the old covenants made between God and our faith ancestors. God made a covenant with Noah to never destroy all creation in a flood again. God made a covenant with Abraham that promised His presence, the Promised Land and progeny, descendants as numerous as the stars. At Mt. Sinai God made a covenant with the people Israel where God claimed them as His people if they would claim Him as their only God. This covenant included the Law, God’s commandments, God’s boundaries for living in relationship with God and in relationship with other people. All of these covenants were God given, God inspired, and God initiated. They were God’s promises to God’s people.

But you know human nature—we are sinful creatures. No sooner were the laws written on the tablets at Mt Sinai then the people of Israel were turning away from God and giving in to their selfish desires. We may have good intentions to follow the Lord, but time and again fall short of those intentions due to sin.

Our biblical history is full of times when God renewed the covenant created at Mt. Sinai, repeating over and over again the cycle of covenant making and covenant breaking. By the time God was speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God had had enough.

Realistically, God could have washed his hands of all of us, giving up forever on those he called as his own people. After all, our ancestors were pretty rebellious men and women and they passed on their genes of rebellion against God that we still must overcome today.

But God did not give up on us.

God still claimed as us beloved children. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

God still called us to take seriously who and whose we are, for now and for all eternity.

Then God promised a new covenant, a new way of being in relationship with each other that emphasizes grace and faith rather than law and works, a covenant which God writes and then helps us to obey. Unlike the old covenant at Sinai, this covenant would be written on our hearts, a covenant whose motivation comes from the inside out, not forced down upon us from an outside source.

As Rev. Dennis Bratcher notes: “They did not need another law or a different law; they needed a change of heart that would allow them to respond appropriately and faithfully within the relationship to which God has already called them, and to the instructions he had already given them for living in the world as his people. The newness needed to come at the point of this change of heart not with more or better laws.”

--Dennis Bratcher, Copyright 2006, CRI / Voice Institute, cresourcei.org

When you think of the heart, do you think of the organ pumping within you that is your lifeblood and core of your body? If you have had heart issues you might be better tuned to that organ. Or do you think of having heart, of feeling an emotion of love and warmth and compassion?

Usually in the English language when we talk about a change of heart we talk about a change of emotion, moving toward warm and happy feelings of love and joy for the world. Yet in the Hebrew language the heart goes much deeper than mere emotion. Whenever we hear the Bible talk about a change of heart or loving God with all your heart, they are talking about the heart as the core of our being, not only emotion but also will and intention, the central place of our life and our knowledge.

This means that when God writes the new covenant on our hearts, it is written at the very core, the very center of our beings, a place from which we will make conscious decisions about how we will act, how we will think, and how we will feel.

This was a promise to our faith ancestors in exile, and a promise to us today.

Knowing we have sinned, knowing we are in constant need of renewal, God continues to love us anyway. God offers us a new covenant written on our hearts as a new way to be in direct relationship with God. No longer did the exiles need to worship at the Temple. In no way must you go through me in order to offer your prayers to God.

This new covenant if offered for all people, from the least to the greatest, ordinary people and rulers alike, a relationship based on God’s forgiveness of our sins. What a gift of love, to wipe clean the slate of our sins and then forget we ever sinned!

Have you ever typed something up on the computer- a paper, email, project, and instead of hitting save you accidentally hit delete? The forgiveness of our sins is as if God had us type into the computer a list of every wrong we have done and every deed we have left undone, all our hurts, all our sins, all our failures, and then, instead of printing out the list and holding it against us the rest of our lives, instead of publishing it all over the world wide web for all the world to see, God hits the delete key and wipes this list from his computer hard drive in such a way that it can never be recovered, to proclaim that the list of our sins has never existed. What a gift of love, to forgive and forget and offer us a new relationship.

Rev. Dennis Bratcher once again talks about this gift by saying, “..We see here a portrayal of God that emerges in greater depth and detail than ever before in the Old Testament, a God who is willing to forgive when there is no basis for forgiveness other than his love and his own desire to restore a broken relationship. This was God’s own chosen people, whom he had created in the world to be his people, whom he had called to live a life that reflected who he was as their God. And yet they had failed. Not once, but across centuries. There was no precedent for this occasion. And so there was no guarantee that God would still be gracious and forgiving. With the relationship between God and his people broken so badly, there was no reason to believe that there was anything that could restore it. And yet the nature of God as a God who is willing to go to great lengths to restore that relationship is clearly proclaimed here.

God’s forgiveness is simply from the perspective of starting over again. There is no punishment that will suffice, no penance that would be appropriate, no effort that could achieve what God has freely offered to these people. There will still be exile. The consequences of sin will work out. But there is a forgiveness that awaits in the midst of exile that does not come because of exile. This forgiveness comes simply because God chooses to offer it, with no prerequisites and no preconditions. God’s choice for these sinners is nothing short of him simply saying, "I will forgive."

--Dennis Bratcher, Copyright 2006, CRI / Voice Institute, cresourcei.org

God said to our ancestors in exile long ago and says to us today,

I will forgive you.

I will restore you.

I will continue to love you through every season of your life.

Whenever we come to Christ’s tables we hear his words:

this is my body,

this is my blood,

this is the new covenant for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

God is present with us through every season of our lives. How do we respond to God’s presence and grace?

We begin in this hour of worship. In a moment we will renew our faith in God and commitment to Christ through the Covenant Prayer and Holy Communion. We respond to God’s grace with our worship and praise in the presence of the community of faith.

Beyond this hour, there are many ways to renew your faith in this new year. You could commit to five minutes more of daily prayer. You could invite a friend to read and reflect with you on a specific book of the Bible. You could commit to a new study in the new year, or say yes to a new opportunity to serve in Christ’s name. You could be open to looking for God moments in every day of your life.

Now is the time to be renewed. How will you respond to God’s presence and grace?

To close today, I invite you to recite together a powerful covenant prayer by John Wesley. The words are not to be spoken lightly. Bishop Palmer even admits this prayer, quote, “whiplashes me.” For it invites [us] to see every aspect of [our lives] through the lens of [our] relationship with God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

--www.westohioumc.org/conference/news/praying-through-new-year 1-17

If you have never welcomed Jesus into your heart as Savior and Lord, I invite you to pray this as a prayer of commitment, responding to God’s love and grace.

If you have known Jesus for a few months or for many years, I invite you to pray this as a prayer of renewal, recommitting your life to Christ’s ways.

Together, now, let us proclaim our faith in Christ by surrendering our lives, first in reciting the words of John Wesley, followed by coming forward to receive the bread and cup of communion. Together, may we claim now as the time to be renewed.

Let us pray… (#607)

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,

Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,

Let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.