

ECCLESISASTES 3:1-8

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.

IF ONLY...

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

So what time is it for us? *A time to weep?* If we allowed ourselves, we would all probably shed a few tears over the shocking and disheartening events of the past week. *A time to mourn?* Nearly 400,000 Americans dead from the virus, hospital ICU's and morgues beyond their capacity to deal with the volume of new arrivals and the surge from the holidays promising even more mortalities. Yes, for millions, it is *A time to mourn. A time to refrain from embracing?* Besides my wife, I can't hug anybody. If you would actually list everything you have lost in the past eleven months, you would indeed affirm that it is *A time to weep.*

This is a powerful scripture because it is a sober reminder that everything in life—including life itself—is temporary. It is not something, of course, that we wish to be reminded of. (Sorry about that, but it's my job). It is our existential reality. In fact, it is rare that I do not read these verses at any memorial service I conduct. And this is why: under most circumstances, we avoid grief like the plague. We socially distance from it; and if we're smart, we wear masks. Why? Because it is so painful that we have a strong motivation to try and find a way around it. But at a funeral, mourning is not only acceptable, it is encouraged. By embracing grief rather than running away from it sets us on the road to healing. So, people are much more receptive to these verses on such an occasion.

Not grieving for our losses has consequences too numerous to mention. You see, when we attempt to hop-scotch over our pain, it requires us to devise behavioral strategies to get us around it—strategies that may have unintended and disastrous results. Many Trump supporters have not been able to accept that their hero lost the election. But rather than finding appropriate ways to grieve, they turned their pain into rage. And this is what can happen and ultimately lead to posing to ourselves the gut-wrenching question: "If Only..." "If Only I had listened to the facts." "If Only I had taken a different course of action." "If Only I had been

smarter.”

For the rest of us, vaccinations for this cruel virus plaguing our world are now at hand and should be available to all of us in the coming months. So blessedly, there is an answer at hand to the source of our grief. And that is a wonderful development which will allow us to move on to *A time to heal; A time to laugh; A time to dance; and yes, A time to embrace*. But at the same time, it would be unconscionable if we do not also seize the opportunity to learn from our mistakes so that we do not repeat history in the future.

Additional information will undoubtedly emerge as we proceed forward. Nevertheless, there is more than enough already in the public domain to reach some conclusions about how and why our national response to the virus was arguably the least effective in the world—why we who have only four percent of the global population have suffered 20% of the fatalities. And my premise is that the deepest underlying motive—beneath all of the politics involved (and there were plenty)—was the avoidance of grief.

Let’s take a closer look...and as always, you are free to draw your own conclusions. While there were numerous prongs to this, the point of origin came from the vacuum of leadership in Washington and the misinformation disseminated regarding the gravity of the situation. As you may recall, the President admitted in his interview with Bob Woodward that he knew how serious it was in February, but what he conveyed to the American people was that it was basically a nothing burger and would just disappear in April when the weather warmed. His political intent, of course, was to avoid a slowdown in the economy which any sort of lockdown would cause because he feared it would damage his chances of reelection. Instead, he preferred the Swedish model of working to achieve a herd immunity by allowing as many viral casualties as possible. As he stated in a recently acquired email, “We want them (meaning us) to get infected.” If Only he had adopted a different strategy, I believe he would have won the election.

But let’s move beyond that to the unconscious avoidance of grief that likely lay beneath

these decisions. Returning to the Woodward interview, the President's rationale for dismissing the danger of the virus was that he did not want to create a public panic. I don't know about you, but I would like to be given a little more credit for my ability to handle adversity.

And yet, what we have learned in the aftermath of all this is that indeed many Americans cannot cope with reality when it flies in the face of what they perceive to be their entitlements or their "personal freedom" as they usually express it or when their candidate loses an election. What I suspect is at issue is an unconscious avoidance of facing issues around grief and loss. But in hop-scotching over the pain, we can obviously end up in much greater peril.

USA Today recently ran a front-page article about the consequences of denying the power of the virus. The report featured Dodge City, Kansas, a famous frontier town of about 250,000 people. As you might imagine, it has deep roots in myths of individualism and personal liberties— "Don't tell *me* what to do!" So, when the warnings came, they were shrugged off and the city's leadership made no safety mandates whatever. And that decision was apparently confirmed when they survived the first wave relatively unscathed. Told you so!

But then came the second wave and suddenly the virus caught fire. At this point, city officials rescinded their hands-off approach and instituted a mask mandate which most people just ignored. Some businesses and restaurants attempted to enforce it, but their customers refused to cooperate. By mid-December, a full ten percent of the population had been infected. If Only we had taken it seriously! The wreckage from not wishing to panic us will have lasting effects on the lives of millions of Americans. How many tens of thousands of lives might have been saved? How many jobs might not have been lost? How many extra months will it take the economy to fully recover? If Only... If Only... If Only...

Decisions have consequences. And here is what I **don't** want to happen: I don't want any of us to be asking, "If Only I had gotten the vaccine when I could have." What time is it in our lives right now? I think it is time we listened to the experts rather than the conspiracy theorists and protected ourselves and those we love. Herd immunity can be acquired without

all of us being infected. And how is it we do not have the responsibility as Christians to do what we can to participate in defeating this virus so that we can open the economy and people can go back to work and allow the exhausted health care workers to get some rest and resume their lives? In a word, to help stop the death and mayhem in its tracks so people no longer need to confront so much loss and grief?

For everything there is a season...And what time is it for us? Is it A time to plant? Is it A time to heal; A time to build up; A time to love; and A time for peace? Is it A time to register for vaccination?

Reverend Thomas Dunlap January 10, 2021