

Old Testament Lesson—Ecclesiastes 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.

New Testament Lesson—John 14:1-7, 18-21, 25-27

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

I want to first thank you all for coming alongside me these past four weeks. I hope it's been helpful to consider how the Bible addresses times of great change.

One of the main takeaways I hope you'll hold onto is just how much Scripture talks about the transitions we go through. Both testaments have a lot to say about change because change is one of life's non-negotiables. It's inevitable and a huge part of the human condition.

Human beings grow and age and wither and fade—not unlike the grass and flowers. In fact, change is happening around us all the time. It is the nature of things. And it happens so fast that we just can't take it all in. If we tried, our heads would pound and we'd be left dizzy.

That tree in your yard looks basically the same as yesterday. Right? But you know that, in reality, it's not the same. It's likely lost hundreds of leaves and maybe a few branches too—especially in this Iowa wind. It's tough to monitor all the tiny, gradual things.

The constant transitions taking place around us are too much to process. We're just not meant to comprehend it all. It's like riding in a car down the highway. You're going to get sick if you focus on the things close to you going by at warp speed: line, line, line, line...bush, bush, bush, bush...

No, it's best to look at what's further away as it more gradually approaches and then gets smaller and smaller behind you until it disappears—like that silo in the distance.

Yes, change is happening all around us, all the time. And that makes sense. I mean, that's the way it should be, right? It should be that way if we truly believe in God as Creator—the Creator Whose creativity has never stopped—not once since the words, “Let there be light.”

If God is always creating—If God is constantly making things new and breathing life into the world, then it makes sense that our lives are caught up in this whirlwind of cause and effect, of action and reaction, growth and decay, life and death.

And, you know: Christ understands this aspect of reality better than anyone ever has or ever will. He is, we could say, our most trusted voice when it comes to the series of transitions we call life.

Think about this for a second. Basic Christian theology says that God was incarnate in the person of Jesus. Said less fancy: God became a human being; and that human's name was Jesus—born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, died in Jerusalem.

Our God, the Maker of all things seen and unseen—God, who willfully and knowingly created a world marked by ebb and flow—a world sustained through constant transformation—*this* Creator put all Their power into a physical body of flesh and blood—a human body that would grow and experience the shifting courses of nature while navigating the diverse cultural landscape of ancient Palestine.

This God, whose creation is ever-evolving, was born into a human whose body is always changing (like ours). Friends, this is why Jesus is best suited to speak comfort and peace into an anxious world of rapid progress.

It's why I believe he understands our transitions and changing earth better than anyone else. His unique identity puts him in that position of authority. He is the Architect of Creation *and* One affected and molded by the architecture. Simply incredible.

Yes, God is unchanging; but Jesus is our rule breaking, status quo-shattering Change Agent we strive to follow.

In short: When Christ addresses what his disciples then and now can expect to face—circumstances that will surely reform and refine us—we offer our undivided attention and all the energy we have at our disposal.

When Christ anticipates the future and wants to prepare us for it, it's up to us to take him seriously. It's our responsibility—part of our calling as disciples to not just be open to the ways God is remaking the world, but to also do our part in opening the way to those changes—to facilitate God's peace and justice across Creation.

So, praise the Lord! How fortunate for us, then, that we have this idea of God's ongoing transformation woven into the fabric of our theology. How encouraging for us—as Presbyterians—as Reformed Christians—to have Spirit-led change baked into our identity. You might say that transition is our bread and butter.

Expecting change, preparing for it, implementing it—that's part of who we are as those grounded in the Reformed tradition. We hear this every October on Reformation Sunday, but (you know) we'd do well to be reminded of it more often.

To that end, here are those words we should hear more than once a year: “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God.” The church reformed, always to be reformed.

Over time, these words have become a slogan of sorts for Presbyterians—even a rallying cry in some circles—reminding us of who we are, Whose we are, and who we intend to be.

“The church reformed, always to be reformed,” means that God is never done with us, and that we are never done with God. Though we’re new creations in Christ Jesus (it’s true), we’re always striving to become *more* like Jesus—trying to follow him more closely—seeking to learn more and to do better.

Friends, I’m sorry if this seems obvious, but it needs to be said: None of us will ever reach a point on our spiritual journeys when we can say, “Well, it looks like I’ve become the most like Jesus I can be.” Great job, Johnny! No, not gonna happen!

And the same goes for the church, too. This Body of Christ will never reach perfection. The church won’t reach a ceiling of inclusion—won’t ever reach some threshold when it’s put as much justice and peace and equity into the world that it can.

And y’all...I know this can be especially difficult for Presbyterians—we who place such a high value on education. No matter how smart we think we are, no matter how justice-oriented we believe ourselves to be, we’ve got to remain humble.

We’re not better than everyone else. We’re learning *along with* everyone else.

We’ve got to remain teachable—to remain coachable. Now, don’t misunderstand. I’m not suggesting we abandon our roots or walk away from our foundations. I happen to be quite fond of our theological traditions.

However...I *am* asking that we remember who we are, Whose we are, and who we intend to be. We’re children of God—steeped in the Reformed tradition—and that means we can always *be* better. We can always *do* better.

These days, I hear the words of Dr. Maya Angelou echoing a lot in my mind: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.” Now she wouldn’t have paired that advice with the Reformed tradition, but I think it fits the bill well.

Friends: I think the moment we stop trying to improve—the moment we stop seeking reformation—is the moment we stop being “a place for everyone.”

As soon as we start acting like we always know better—that we have nothing to learn from other communities, we stop being “a place for everyone.”

With the comfort that Christ has prepared a place for everyone in the life to come, we can be free to create “a place for everyone” in the here and now—a place that embraces reformation—that celebrates the transitions being brought about by the Holy Spirit.

In this part of John’s gospel—a text we often hear consoling us in our grief—Christ reveals he will experience a human death in the same way his disciples will. Our Creator, then, will know what it’s like to breathe a final breath.

The most universal of transitions, then—one every person shares—the truth that we are dust and shall return to dust—this transition, Jesus will share too.

You see: I think Jesus is thinking much bigger here—much more inclusively—than we typically give him credit for here in John. Yes, Jesus is preparing his followers for a world without his physical presence—a world inspired, animated, and guided by the Holy Spirit (yes)—but these tender words go *beyond* that...

What I hear in these intimate moments is a Savior determined to bridge the divides we’ve maintained—a Lord heaven bent on tearing down the walls we’ve built between us.

So here it is: In the diversity of people and practice within the Church, all of us (no matter our tradition or how we were raised) must anticipate the transitions that accompany death. Together, with our family and friends (our faith community), we must face the changes that precede death and those that follow.

Think about all the major adjustments we have to make when those we love go home to God. Think of all the preparations we put in place (depending on the situation of course). Think about all the things we didn't think of until after the fact—things we wish we had known.

This is the fundamental human connection Jesus shares with us. The Jesus of John's gospel is always pointing away from himself. So it makes sense that he's not just talking about his own death and what comes after. He's talking about that which we all share.

The Holy Spirit doesn't just keep Jesus alive and with us. The Holy Spirit keeps everyone we love and miss alive in our hearts—within the memory of the church—among the communion of saints to which we all belong.

And, in my humble opinion, that's a big part of what makes the gospel such good news.

Christ not only shares our grief; he shares what we go through as we bury those we love. He shares what we go through as we come to the end of our own journeys—along with all the changes and transitions in between.

So, where do we go from here? We keep following our Lord who knows our human struggles in all their complexity. We keep learning and doing better—letting ourselves be refined and remade. We keep making this community a “place for everyone.”

We trust that, if Christ shares that most basic of human realities with us, then we can be certain his Spirit is with us and leading us through every twist and turn ahead.

We can be sure that his Spirit prepares the way for us—a way through every transition and set of changes that await us—be it still waters, green pastures, or the valley of the shadow of death.

For everything there is a season. A time to be born, and a time to die. For everything there is a season. Yes, but isn't change always in season? For that matter, isn't reformation?

Amen.