

Sermon Text for August 29, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

James 1:2, Ecclesiastes 3:1 *“A season of loss and reclaiming joy”*

On Friday morning at my house I have asked a few men from the community to gather and be together in fellowship and prayer. We spoke about this past year and it was interesting that for those who were not pastors this time was for one a bit of a break from church programs and activities and allowed them to reset. For me I shared that it was probably the most difficult time in my time as a pastor. I don't mind troubleshooting, I enjoy it actually, but the cost of this season in our life of broken relationships and leadership being doubted and discarded and seasons of loss have been extremely difficult.

I know how to run church programs, I've done it in a number of places all over the world and I think people have benefitted from the presence of God through the programs and through the worship in which we have been a part. But there has been so much loss around us during this time without its counterpart of rebuilding and new life, for the most part, that it has simply been the most difficult season in my life as a pastor. But I know that for many of you we have walked through those losses together.

These losses remain and impact us just as the pandemic remains and continues to impact us as we pray without ceasing that the opening of the schools does not create a new hazard but rather allows us to continue our road to recovery. That should be our prayer right about now. But what is true in life is that we cannot reclaim the joy that I have encouraged you to find in the midst of the pandemic, so much so that I preached an entire series on surprised by joy, how to find joy in the midst of trials and tribulations, but you can't reclaim joy until you have identified loss. We are going to do that today because I know that all of us, every single one of us, has experienced loss in some way during this season and we are going to claim it in a way that will allow us to embrace the joy that Christ has laid out for us in His plans.

Both of our Scriptures today view trials as seasons or times in life and all of these seasons, and all of these times, are directed and determined by God. Let's read.

READ

Our first reading comes from the author James who is thought to be, potentially, the brother of Jesus. He finds himself, like Paul, in the first century when Christians are being persecuted. Like we saw in the book of Philippians the trials that the early Christians experienced are of a degree and level that we cannot imagine. The culture in which we live not

only is predominantly shaped and influenced by Christianity, but you are very much in the advantage if you are a Christian. That was not the case in the first century, so when James talks about trials, we shouldn't think about prayer in school, or Christian influence in modern culture, we should think about if you were found out to be a Christian you would be killed, your life would be in danger. That, my friends, are the types of trials that James describes.

He is able to write in this first chapter that the trials that they are experiencing are to produce the joy of endurance. Consider it nothing but joy when you face trials, and then he goes on to say, because your endurance is being built up. I want each of us to think about our trials since March of 2020. Each one of us has gone through trials during this time, you are not the only one, but not each one of us has experienced them in the same way. What were your trials?

We have identified some clear losses that we have experienced during this time, but I am sure that there are others. We have identified loss of life – I know that I have walked with some of you as you have lost a spouse during this time and you could not mourn and grieve as you would like as we either had to hold the service outside or with limited number inside. Your loss remains as you navigate this terrible time alone. We have people in church who are going through that now.

We have identified loss of work where the job where you were working was taken from you as you were laid off or your income was dramatically reduced and for the first time in your life maybe you were feeling inadequate, unable to provide not because of anything that you had done wrong. Loss of work raises so many issues of identity, all casualties during this pandemic.

Many of you have spoken to me of loss of relationships, within your own families, or with friends, or even within this church. We have seen families torn apart by this pandemic because of the stances that people have taken on masks, vaccinations, many of these issues somehow tied to politics. Can you imagine if the polio vaccine were tied to politics? Can you imagine if the seat belt were tied to politics, how many more deaths and how many more people would go through life maimed?

Our own church has seen loss of relationships with some choosing to leave, with others still waiting to return in the midst of this uncertainty and this spike. Being apart and being away from each other, even if we are able to worship virtually, simply is not the same and it is categorically a loss.

We spoke about the loss of unity and this is seen similarly in what we mentioned earlier. There used to be a time that in a family if you disagreed that was okay but if someone from outside the family tried to disagree with either of you you banded together and family was

thicker than politics, yeah, not so much for everyone, people are choosing politics even over family, breaking a unity that has been present for centuries.

I am sure that you have experienced other losses during this time, but now is the time to claim them. James claims the trials and identifies them as that which God allows which leads to joy, similar to what Paul states when he says that all things work together for good, even the trials in our lives. I know they do not feel like they lead to good, but our trust is not found in our feelings during our trials, but rather in the confidence that God is holding even the trials in his hands as we go through them.

The author of Ecclesiastes calls them seasons of life, not trials. For the author of Ecclesiastes these events are simply elements of human experience. No matter who we are these events that he describes in these 24 opposite statements, are experiences that we will all experience. Every single person in this room will go or has gone through what he describes. There will be times in our lives when we experience and go through death, as well as the birth of new life. What the author wants to remind us, hear this now, his primary purpose of writing this is to underscore that all events are determined by God and are beyond human control.

These key activities of life which we all go through, serve as examples of how all times are fixed by God. All seasons of life are fixed by God. Good and bad, and over them humans have no control.

We find the wisdom in this Scripture that for every course of action in one direction, there will occur in due time an equal and opposite reaction. None of these things that are written about here in Ecclesiastes has universal sway over another any more than exhaling or inhaling dominates the rhythm of breathing. Our challenge, is to discern the right and the wrong time for appropriate conduct and speech. In some ways it seems like this is a plug for situational ethics.

There is some support for this in Scripture: Look at Proverbs 26:4-5. So wait, which one is it? There is a time to respond to fools, and a time to keep silence. The challenge for us as Christians is to figure out the right and the wrong times.

We must not try to escape the truth from Scripture that we find in Psalm 31:16 where the Psalmist states: “my times are in your hands”. Time is something determined by God and a mystery to humans who are involved in this time, in their own season controlled by God.

There is a common statement that many make that drives me absolutely crazy and is a statement that goes contrary to this concept. The statement: “It is what it is”. I know, some of you use it all the time. Stop using it, it is a sign of defeat and fatalism. Christians are not a group of moral superheroes, and trials remind us that we have to depend on God. When we say

it is what it is we are expressing an apathy that not even God can make a difference. Where do you read that? It is not what it is. It is as God will it and demands it to be or it is not at all.

We are now going to identify these losses that we have experienced while all the while acknowledging that we are not pawns in the game of chance, but rather that we are children of God who loves us and guides and directs us even through the valley of the shadow of death. We can only reclaim the joy that is a part of our identification of children of God by acknowledging our loss, but championing the presence of God. Amen.