Mark 13:32-37 and Ecclesiastes 3:1
Jesus: the one who reforms our life

One of my first real introductions to this passage that we are about to dive into for the next few months was when I was a brand new pastor. Stacy and I were in Southern Italy working with the Waldensian Church, we were living in an orphanage that we were helping to run and we had then three churches over which we were pastoring between the two of us. All of this was in Italian, and in the church that was in the palace where the orphanage was we had a gathering of all the local Protestant pastors, kinda like our Strasburg ministerium. We met each month and each month one of the pastors presented on a Scripture, it was my turn and I presented on Revelation 3:15-16 and the point of this Scripture, and I said all of Revelation, is no compromise. We are commanded to never compromise in our faith.

This was an important message in Italy because in that room full of Protestant pastors we were absolutely in the minority, less than one percent of the population was Protestant so we had our work cut out to do, and if any of us compromised, then it would lead to massive shortcomings in our communities. So I gave an impassioned appeal for pastors to never compromise to and to stick to the Gospel as the guiding light in all that we did. There was some discussion, and it got it a bit emotional and heated because who was I, a young 25 year old to tell a room full of pastors to never compromise.

Finally one of the wisest, not oldest, but one of the wisest pastors stood up, he was head of the Lutheran Church in that region, and he read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and then he added as a last one, there is a time to compromise and a time not to compromise. Who are we to lay down a lay that was not created by God to imply that compromise is one of the greatest sins known to humanity. There could be a time and a place for compromise in our Christian walk. He was right, I knew it, and I learned an important lesson that day in the context of this Scripture of Ecclesiastes. It has been one of my favorites ever since.

We begin Ecclesiastes today and we are not going to look at the entire book but rather just chapter 3 and the first 8 verses in this chapter. It will take us through Christmas. Let's learn a little bit about it. It is traditionally taught that Solomon, King David's son, so King Solomon wrote this book of the Bible. In chapter 1 we read that it is read by the teacher, which in Hebrew is Qoheleth, there is a Scrabble word for a Q without a U. It can be translated to preacher, or

teacher, or ruler or someone who was in a position of power. When the Old Testament was translated into the Greek the word used for Qoheleth was Ekklesiases which in Greek can mean leader or teacher. That's where we get the name for this book of the Bible, a Greek rendition of the Hebrew term Qoheleth.

It is thought that in Solomon's life he wrote three books of the Bible in three different eras of his life. As a young prince he wrote Song of Solomon, in the prime of his life as a king he wrote proverbs, and then in his older years he wrote Ecclesiastes. Three books of the Bible in three different seasons of his life. This last book that he wrote, as some of us tend to become as we get older so we need to be on guard for this, speaks to the polarity of human activity. Now, as disciples of Jesus Christ we believe strongly and without a doubt that the Providence of God leads to our welfare and not to our harm, but that isn't reflected clearly in Ecclesiastes. We find ourselves addressing the best known passage of this book, but the rest of the book you do find a cynical, somewhat bitter author writing about the vanity of vanities over which we not only have no control, but there is no guarantee that it is for our own good.

The author just might say that at the root of this book is the incapacity of human beings to save themselves from the ever present and power of chance and the indiscriminate presence of death. If Socrates said: The unexamined life is not worth living, and he did say that, then Qoheleth, or Solomon in his old age just might have said something along the lines of: the examined life makes you wish you were dead. But in the light of Jesus we know that we have a future of hope, something this author did not know, or at least did not share if he did know it. So it is our desire today to not succumb to the temptation of cynicism but rather embrace the reform that Jesus wants for our life.

READ

Today is Reformation Sunday, the Sunday that we celebrate Martin Luther posting the 95 thesis of discontent on the door of the church in Wittenberg German. As a result that sparked a change in the way that we do and understand church all across the world. There aren't too many Sundays that we celebrate an event that took place in history and is not recorded in the Bible. This summer with the youth on our mission trip we visited Rome and saw the reason why the

church was in such upheaval. The grandiosity of St. Peter's and the beauty of it was undeniable, and yet the poverty and the ignorance of the people of that time was equally undeniable.

The reformation was not the second coming of Jesus. It was a shift, a cultural, political, economic, and religious shift which took our understanding of our relationship with God away from it being tied up directly with the priest and the religious leader and placed it squarely back where it was meant to be, on the shoulders of each individual as they participated and took part in the life of their local church. This is what was at the heart of the better covenant that we saw in Hebrews, an ability to have direct access to God which was taken away by the church of that era and that Lutheran wanted to give back to the people.

As Presbyterians we call ourselves Reformed Christians because we draw our history out of that movement and that time period which again places our personal relationship with Jesus as the primary act of faith in our lives. Our Scripture in Mark today reminds us that in all seasons of our lives we must be ready for Jesus to return, with an anticipation and joy that comes from seeing him face to face. Mark reminds us that we do not know when that will happen, in what season, in what time period. He starts with that: about the day or the hour no one knows.

When we talk about the seasons of our lives that are reflected in the Ecclesiastes Scripture, the same can be said. We know that these are seasons in our lives but when they will come, and when they will transition to something else, we don't know, we just have to be ready to approach every season with the same confidence and trust in the Lord as the other season.

The polarities that we will be seeing remind us that all events are determined by God and are beyond human control. Everything happens at a time determined by God, and not by us. We see that concept repeated in Psalm 31:14-15 which states: But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, You are my God. My times are in your hand. The challenge that the author lays out for us here is are we able to trust in the Lord and place our times in God's hands even in those seasons of life that are less desireable?

One of my favorite places on this planet is now Iceland. My favorite city in the world is still Rome, and in the United States it is Boston, but now my favorite location in the world is Iceland, and it is because of its extreme polarities. They call it the land of fire and ice, but it is also the land of utter calm and raging winds, it is also the land of harsh unforgiving cold and

gentle soothing warmth. But the charm of Iceland is that all of this can happen in an hour, if you don't like the weather, just wait 15 minutes and it will change. It isn't just the weather, it is also the landscape, as you are driving around that country what beauty of the glaciers will be transformed into the jaggedness of the lava fields. It is crazy.

These types of polarities, these types of opposites are very present in our own lives and the author of Ecclesiastes writes about it in a way that could potentially strip any hope away from us. But we don't want that, because we have Jesus, which is why the covenant under which Solomon lived was far inferior to our covenant because our covenant as a result of the presence of Jesus, is far better.

If we hold onto this truth, then both the desired and the detested have their place in human existence. Each activity that is laid out in this chapter has its relative worth in its place. No one activity has universal sway over any other. Now that can lead to the wizened old Lutheran pastor making a case for situational ethics, a term and a concept that I despise, and yet there is some truth to that as well. For everything there is a moment, there is a time, there is a season, for everything in our lives if we trust that Jesus is the reformer of our life and we allow him to reform our life, to burn out the dross and that which gets in the way of loving and serving him.

This means it is left to the wise reader to discern the situation, the season, and how to act. Ecclesiastes tells us that we are not free agents and in the land of the free that doesn't go over well, but it is true. All that takes place in our lives is a product of universal necessity over which God, a righteous and loving God, but nevertheless it is all on God's shoulders. This could supply patient courage for us in those seasons that are less desirable, or it could entangle us in a web of fatalism. That is our choice.

It is part of the wisdom of life to know where to catch the flowing tide and when to recognize that what is before us is something that will not be undone. The wise will accept the shining note of life as well as the inevitability of its shadows. As Mark tells us, the seasons are laid out by God, we just don't know when they will come or how long it will last. Jesus will come back again, we believe that and we trust that, but we just don't know when that will be. In the meantime, allow him to reform your life. Amen.