

REFLECTIONS OF A DEPARTING PASTOR  
Ecclesiastes 3:1; Philippians 4: 1-9;13; Matthew 28: 18-20

When people in different parts of the country talk about the change of seasons, we here in Florida have learned to tune them out. Our seasons are less delineated; our four seasons seem to be comfortable, warm, hot, or hotter. So weather changes of season are different here. But there is a kind of season that is affecting us today: the kind that the preacher from Ecclesiastes described: As the King James Version classically says it; “To *everything* there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” That was the whole Scripture passage from that book today, because in the exhaustive list underneath it, I couldn’t for the words, “A time to be hired, and a time to retire.” But I believe if he thought of it, he’d have included it. I had a season of preparation for my life’s work, as you probably did, going through high school, or trade school, or on to higher education or hands on training to prepare you for your life’s work. Mine took 19 years: 12 years through high school, 4 years of college, and then three years of seminary. Then later in my life I got urged by my daughter, who was in seminary herself, to come and work for the Doctor of Ministry degree. I did; and she was right; it was enriching. But my next season of life had more than begun; it was more than half over. My season of productive ministry started in my first congregation in Malvern, Arkansas, with a group of people that we still love to the point that we are still in touch with many of them through Facebook. My season of ministry continued when God said “Stop” to that first part of my ministry, and “Go!” for the second part of my ministry: to seek a new call, and a new call indeed came: from Westminster By-The Sea Presbyterian Church in Daytona Beach (before we annexed to Daytona Beach Shores.) We have loved this congregation too. But 4 years in one congregation, and 37 years in another is quite a season, especially if, again, God is calling the shots. God said, in a matter of speaking, “Stop” when I changed from my first church, and “Go!” when I arrived

here. And now God has said “Done!” *So, I am done. My spirit feels it; my Savior knows it, and it is well with my soul.* I will be moving into another season of life. People ask “What will you do?” My one-word answer is “Recover,” recover from the harshness of navigating 2021. But then, as I have written, all my life I have heard God’s guidance and have responded to it, from before the time I decided to ask Mary Ann to marry me, to the time when it the voice told me to step away from my first church, and then the time that voice said since months ago that I needed to step away from serving here. Why wouldn’t I now still listen for the voice of God too? So I will. I will read books that have nothing to do with sermon preparation; I will travel including taking cruises that I love so much, since my hobby, even before moving here, was following ocean liners and cruise ships.

Although I had a survivor from the Titanic visit my fourth-grade class and I never forgot it, Mary Ann, working in a bookstore in Princeton, New Jersey, bought me my next reason to eagerly learn more: a magnificent book on the liners that I had seen in her bookstore window! So we will travel; and through nothing that I could control, our three fabulous children, married thee fabulous spouses with four fabulous grandsons all live within two hours of us! Now we can travel to see the sports or events in which they are involved instead of missing those events on weekends. But seasons change, so weekends will now be on the table.

One of Paul’s special letters was to the Christians of Philippi; it was a letter of encouragement, and so I choose that letter as the template for my sermon of encouragement to you. It is warm and uplifting because Paul had stayed close to them even after he left. It is likely that we may stay in touch with many of you here as we have with the first congregation where I was Pastor. “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi,” begins Paul. You too are saints in Christ Jesus if you love him and have supported this congregation. When you belong to a church, you belong

to Christ too, who we call the Head of the Church. Paul says that means that *we* are the body of Christ: the hands, the feet, the mouth, and ears, and more. As people have visited our congregation, we hope they have seen many of us as examples of doing what Christ would do and saying what Christ would say. We should reexamine our lives if people see us differently. Now 30 years ago, we helped give people a decent place to live, singlehandedly building the first Habitat House in Port Orange in 1992; then we assisted in the build of two others. We have regularly worked at the Halifax Urban Ministries feeding site in Daytona Beach, serving meals to over 200 people a day before Covid. Since Covid, we have helped to staff the food pantry housed at Grace Episcopal Church in Port Orange. And have been involved with the birth and encouragement of the Presbyterian Counseling Center through the years, and the creation and encouragement of our Body, Mind, and Soul Health Ministry. Just as I was called to carry out pastoral ministry in both congregations I served, Paul says in Ephesians chapter 4 that “[Jesus’s] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, some teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ (which is the church.)” Have you used your God-given gifts for the building up of the church, and for Jesus’ sake? Not everyone has the same gifts, but we who have gathered here today represent a variety of them! For some of you, teaching is your gift and you have used it. For some, giving time to maintain and repair this beautiful facility pleases God and others. Some have the gift of hospitality and so you are wonderful at welcoming. Some have the gift of compassion, caring for those who are ill or grieving. Some have the gift of music that enhances every Sunday service. For others tithes and special offerings allow this congregation to thrive instead of just maintain. And many people of you pray for us regularly. Your gifts have been signs of your faith.

*If the church is to be here tomorrow and in all of life's tomorrows, you cannot not just think in terms of being ministered to; you will need to think about ministering to others.* There are so many broken people in our world.

Paul crowns his comments with a wonderful passage that begins: "Rejoice in the Lord Always and again I will say rejoice!" That seems impossible on many days. It urges us to put on joy as we practice putting on love too. When you dress each morning, as you put on one garment can you say to yourself "I am putting on joy!" And as you put on your next article of clothing say, "I am putting on love." Sometimes we don't wake up filled with those qualities. We have to *will* ourselves to have them. If we do, our love can change the world for the better, and certainly our joy can do that. And, when you are putting on your shoes, tell yourself, "Today I will look for the possibility of being an evangelist to at least one person!" "Evangelist!" you say back to me. "That's too much!" But friends, if you are trying to follow Jesus, it is he that is asking you to do that. Years ago a church member would always come down the glass elevator of her condo as she was going to church with another couple who were preparing to play tennis. For a couple of weeks she would say "Tennis?" "Yep," they'd say. But one week on the elevator she said, "Look! That's the church I attend! Sometime if you'd like to attend, I'll go with you!" And indeed they came to our church *because they were invited to do so!* Statistical studies have shown that if a Pastor invites someone to church, only 20% percent of people will come. If a lay person invites someone to church 80% will try it! You have the power to grow the church!

Our final passage tells us to go do invite. We have called it the "Great Commission." If Jesus believed that only the 11 disciples who were left to hear his words of his original 12, then Christianity might have died out after only one generation. But Jesus was counting on those original disciples to tell others, and for others telling

others. Some, like Matthew, meticulous Matthew, *wrote down what he said and did!* Matthew is a magnificent gospel. And at the end of it, and no other gospel, he captured Jesus' final words that still are for us today. Jesus implores his followers to "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations." He chose those words deliberately. When he turned over the tables of the moneychangers, he cried out "It is written that my Father's house shall be a house of prayer for *all nations!*" So yes you, and not just me: are to tell others about our church and about our Lord. Invite them to sit here and learn as many of you have done before. Say to them, as other disciples have said to doubters or seekers: "Come and See! Come and See!" It is said that the church is only one generation away from extinction. Jesus counts on us to bring others to him.

Finally, be about the business of building up the church, not just maintaining; not just keeping what we have but working for more. As Paul put it: "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may do excellent things, and be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

And now, in the words of the old hymn: "God be with you till we meet again; when life's perils thick confound you, put unfailing arms around you: God be with you till we meet again."

Let us pray:

Oh Lord my life and the lives of many others have been carried by songs and hymns; some just with voice, some with instruments too. Continue to carry us with music in our lives as we minister to one another, "praising our Savior, all the day long." In His name we pray. Amen.

