

# A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
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- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 12-13 New International Version

<sup>1</sup> There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

- <sup>2</sup> a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- <sup>3</sup> a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,
- <sup>4</sup> a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- <sup>5</sup> a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
- <sup>6</sup> a time to search and a time to give up,  
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
- <sup>7</sup> a time to tear and a time to mend,  
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
- <sup>8</sup> a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace....

<sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. <sup>13</sup> That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

- Matthew 9:14-15 Contemporary English Version

<sup>14</sup> One day some followers of John the Baptist came and asked Jesus, “Why do we and the Pharisees often go without eating, while your disciples never do?”

<sup>15</sup> Jesus answered: The friends of a bridegroom don’t go without eating while he is still with them. But the time will come when he will be taken from them. Then they will go without eating.

Who would choose to begin a new diet on Thanksgiving Day? For most people on most years, Thanksgiving is a festive time spent with loved ones, with dear friends. Often Thanksgiving features large gatherings spilling into several rooms in the house. It’s a time to celebrate, to make merry, to enjoy one another’s company... and one of the ways we do that is with food and drink. It wouldn’t make sense to try to celebrate such a joyful time by abstaining from eating and drinking. Fasting when it’s time to celebrate?!? Unthinkable.

That’s how Jesus felt... especially when he was questioned by some disciples. Not his disciples. Disciples of John the Baptist.

Let’s recall John the Baptist. His mother Elizabeth and Mary the Mother of Jesus were cousins, making Jesus and John something like second cousins. They were probably playmates at times during childhood.

As an adult John had set out on a traveling ministry proclaiming the imminent arrival of God’s savior as promised in ancient scripture. John had called people to join him in getting their lives in shape — cleaning up their act, purifying their hearts, turning away from selfish, self-centered, sinful attitudes and actions. Many people heeded the call of John the Baptist. They repented, turned their lives around, cleaned up their act, and followed him.

Then Jesus came on the scene to begin his public ministry of teaching and preaching and healing. Jesus asked John to do for him what John had been doing for others: the ritual of baptism to signify cleansing of the soul and embracing God's gift of the Spirit. Having been baptized, Jesus began his ministry.

Jesus preached the good news of God's unmerited love for all who place their faith in him. But for whatever reason, John's disciples didn't begin to follow Jesus. They continued living their life of faith as they had before. They continued following John and his personal practices.

One of those practices was to abstain from eating — to fast — two days per week. The Jewish calendar required fasting only *one* day per *year*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, people might fast on other occasions: maybe they wanted to show God they were remorseful for something they'd done, or they were in mourning, grieving a death. But to John's disciples, fasting showed how devoted they were to John. So they didn't abstain from food *one* day per *year*; they fasted *twice* a *week*.

One day some followers of John the Baptist approached Jesus with a question: "Hey, how come your followers don't fast like we do?" Apparently they thought Jesus' disciples weren't as devoted to him as they themselves were to John the Baptist.

To answer their question Jesus used the image of a wedding. He said to them, "If you were celebrating your best friend's wedding, would you choose that occasion to start a diet — to refrain from food and drink? Of course not! While you're with the bridegroom you celebrate. Once he's gone away there will be plenty of time to not raise a glass."

Of course, with the hindsight from our place in history we can imagine that Jesus could see that there would come a time when he would no longer be with his disciples. Like we heard from the Old Testament book called "Ecclesiastes,"

<sup>1</sup> There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens....<sup>4</sup> a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance....<sup>2</sup>

So while the disciples still were in the company of Jesus it was a time to laugh, a time to dance. Jesus believed that it was good for his disciples to recognize and celebrate all God had given them to be thankful for.

What about today? What time is it? What time are we living in right now? We might be quick to say, "*Oh, we're in a time to weep, what with the threat posed by the presence of a global viral pandemic!*"

What time are we living in now? We might argue, "*Well, we're in a time to mourn! After all, just think about all the activities that would normally have filled our summertime days...! Think of how much we would have been hanging out with our friends...! Think of all the places we would have liked to have gone...! Think of all the opportunities lost to spend precious time with our parents or children or grandchildren...!*"

But wait — the Risen Christ is with us just as keenly now as ever! The spirit of the loving Jesus reveals God's immeasurable, unstoppable love as powerfully as we've ever known it. Why would we refrain from celebrating "as long as the bridegroom is with us"?

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<sup>1</sup> On the Day of Atonement, per A.W. Argyle, The Gospel According to Matthew: the Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4 New International Version

Celebrate? In this pandemic season? In this uncertain time? Exactly! With Jesus living in our hearts our lives are filled with blessings — blessings that, sadly, we so often overlook. But Jesus invites us to celebrate the life God has given us, to embrace an approach to our days characterized not by greed and grumbling but by gratitude and joy.

Here are just a few of the things that I celebrate even in this stressful, uncertain time.

First, we all have heard the stories of the city-wide expression of gratitude in New York City at 7 p.m. every day. It started several months ago. Around 7 p.m. people simply started clapping as an audible tip-of-the-cap to the thousands of hospital and public safety workers. Then some started also ringing bells, then blowing horns, shaking rattles, playing music, cheering and yelling from the sidewalks and apartment windows and balconies and rooftop gardens to celebrate the men and women who put themselves at risk caring for anyone and everyone in the Big Apple. That happened every night for months; maybe it still does.

Hearing about that makes me think of the first responders in Cleveland and Phoenix and Knoxville and every other big city in the country.... And then I picture the EMTs and nurses and doctors serving small towns and rural areas where the few-and-far-between hospitals aren't much bigger than your typical Applebee's. I celebrate those dedicated, exhausted, determined servants in these days, and I imagine you do, too.

What else do I find reason to celebrate? I'm thankful for the work being done by a little-known ministry in Ohio to help men and women successfully transition from prison to normal society. This week I heard the founder of an organization called True Freedom Ministries talk about the volunteer chaplaincy they do in Ohio's prisons. He described the partnerships they develop between the state corrections department and local employers. This program enables prisoners to develop marketable job skills through externships. Five days a week they leave the prison at 5:30 in the morning and return at night in order to go to work for the last few months of their sentence. Often they have a full-time job with benefits waiting for them when they're released.

This ministry also helps these men and women find a place to live and arrange transportation so they can get to their jobs. It keeps the vast majority from returning to prison. As one worker said of his transformation from prisoner to taxpaying community member, "So many of us failed so many people, but this ministry believed in us."

Do you remember Jesus telling the story of the Great Judgment in Matthew Chapter 25, when the King says, *"<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me..."*

Many churches and non-profits do a lot of very good work caring for people facing those challenges: the homeless, the hungry, the refugee, the sick.... But Jesus mentioned one more condition that very few of us do anything about: *"I was in prison and you came to visit me."*<sup>3</sup> That's why I'm grateful that there are compassionate, strong, determined, patient people like those at True Freedom Ministries. They do the hard work of trying to help people transition from the cell block to the neighborhood block, helping people who want to do the right thing after doing their time.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:35-36 New International Version

What else do I find to celebrate in these tenuous times? The effort by so many people to continue the education process under pandemic conditions.

- I celebrate the moms and dads who elevated parenting to a whole new level by overnight also assuming the role of classroom teachers. On the fly they had to learn to balance their own workday responsibilities and household duties with new challenges like classroom management right there in the kitchen, and how to help their children with unfamiliar subject matter.
- And I celebrate the students who responded with the necessary flexibility and discipline to make the best of an undesirable situation being away from their teachers and apart from their classmates.
- And I celebrate the building principals and administrators and teachers in school districts throughout Ohio and in every state and in countries around the world who continue to work on figuring out a plan of action for a new school year under circumstances never-before encountered in their careers.

Oh, and one more thing: I celebrate the reassurance we feel from seeing nature, especially on this weekend that officially ushers in the summer season. Nature's beauty is a visual reminder that our largest concern is dwarfed by God's majesty, power, attentiveness, and compassion.

Why would we imagine we have anything to celebrate in these challenging, frustrating, scary times? Because like well-wishers attending to the bridegroom, we know we are living in the presence of Jesus Christ who we worship and serve. We are living in the presence of Jesus Christ who blesses us in this life and with everlasting life. Today and in the days ahead we can find so many reasons to "Praise God from whom all blessings flow...!"