

THE SEASONS OF A CONGREGATION

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 28, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

*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.*

I shared with you on January 7th that the first two sermons I give this year will be specifically focused on the life of our church and as such more *practical* in nature than you often receive from me.

- On that day, drawing from Mary and Joseph presenting their infant Jesus in the Temple, I spoke to both parents and to the congregation as a whole concerning the role each plays in seeking to rear children and youth in the life of faith.
- Today, as we ordain and install our officers and hold our Annual Meeting following worship, I will preach on how we as a congregation can move into the future in this season of change which has come upon us.

If you are a long-term member thank you as always for your commitment to Westminster; if you are relatively new to our church, or considering making Westminster your spiritual home, I hope this will help you glimpse a bit of who we are as a congregation, where we have been, where we intend to go. In addition, I hope all of us see – once again or for the first time – one of the hallmarks of the Presbyterian tradition of doing things “decently and in order.”

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The immediate background is this: Who you see in the chancel has changed in the past ten months.

- In April of last year, we grew from three clergy to four as Whitney Fauntleroy joined us as Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults, the result of a process that began in 2015 to provide ordained leadership in Pastoral Care and Mission, while continuing ordained leadership in youth and young adult ministry and in children’s and family ministry.

- Toward that end, Patrick Hunnicutt – a welcoming and vibrant fixture in our chancel since 2005 – assumed a new role at Westminster, moving from Associate Pastor for Youth and Families to Associate Pastor for Mission and Pastoral Care.
- A month later, our Director of Music Ministries since 2003, Dr. Paul Stetsenko, completed a process he been considering for several years and resigned in order to enter a monastic order in the Orthodox Church of America.
- In September, Dr. Ben Hutchens began his work in what quickly became only the fourth person in our 77-year history to occupy the important post of Director of Music Ministries.
- Then right before Christmas, our chancel ranks thinned as we said goodbye to Casey FitzGerald, who had been our Associate Pastor for Children and Families – renamed Associate Pastor for Christian Formation – to accept a call to lead the redevelopment of John Calvin Presbyterian Church in Annandale.

And these are only the changes you *see* each Sunday you attend.

- We celebrated – also in December – the retirement of Eileen Jinks, our Pastoral Care Coordinator and terrific presence to our seniors.
- We have nervously begun to prepare for the May 1 retirement of Nancy Bea, who has been the Church Business Administrator for 17 years and staff member for 23 years, the invisible hand that keeps the machinery of Westminster running smoothly and quietly.
- And in a couple of weeks Jessica Thurnes, one of two people who keep our front office running so well, will begin a maternity leave of three months.

All of these changes have occurred naturally. None has been initiated by the church. Each change represents a new calling or stage of life for those involved. But these changes are all occurring within a twelve month period.

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In addition to the personal losses different ones of us feel over different departures, these changes are a bit unusual for us as a congregation, for we have historically known tremendous stability in staff and clergy leadership.

- I am only the fifth Pastor Westminster has had since our chartering in 1940.
- The last time an Associate Pastor left for another congregation was 2002, though many of us remember and still mourn the unexpected death of Associate Pastor Karen Blomberg ten years ago this summer.
- And for us to have had eleven years of service in Christian Education from Casey FitzGerald and nearly twelve years of service in youth ministry from Patrick Hunnicutt is almost unheard of in Presbyterian or other mainline churches.

While our church has had stable leadership over the years, our membership has always known significant turnover.

- Since 2006, we have grown from 851 members to 1015 members.
- Perhaps more significantly, we have grown from having 106 children fifth grade or younger to 272, all of whom are in addition to the 1015 members we have.
- We have increased from 74 to 108 middle and high school youth.
- Of our 1015 members, 617 (61%) have joined since 2005.

And beyond the walls of our congregation, during this same period we have seen the White House change hands and parties twice, the House of Representatives and the Senate change majority parties twice each, a significant financial crisis, a slow but now strong recovery, ecclesiastical acceptance of ordination of gays and lesbians for church office and legal acceptance of same sex marriage. And over the past decade, our already intense political climate has grown more intense, which for many of us influences the conversations we have at the water cooler at work, on the soccer field watching our children, drinking coffee in Fellowship Hall. And for some of us, these changes directly impact the work we do, the compensation we receive, the level of stress we experience.

While changes in any congregation are necessary, inevitable, and best greeted with welcome, because a significant part the church's role is to serve as *sanctuary* from the pressures of society, an *island of stability* in a sea of change, changes in the church can be particularly challenging for those of us for whom our church home – Westminster – is dear as refuge and relief.

II.

Earlier in our worship we heard words made famous by the Byrds but penned centuries ago by an ancient Hebrew sage known as Qoheleth, or “The Preacher,” words which appear in his ruminations on life in the book we call Ecclesiastes, which means “the Assembly.”

In the Assembly and in our hearing, Qoheleth reminds us that

*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 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...*

It is when we are moving from one “time” to another “time” that we can experience the most poignant grief, the highest anxiety, the deepest mourning, but also the greatest growth, the most positive renewal of commitment, the most creative ideas and insights. This is what I believe we can and will experience in this time of change for Westminster – grief, yes; anxiety, to sure; growth, yes; creativity, yes! “For *everything* there is a season, and a time for *every* matter under heaven.”

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If you stay for our Annual Meeting, as I hope you do, you will see that with our changes we are doing well in our membership and financial growth, *but not as well as we need to do* to continue to be the church we have become.

- We have seen a slight decline in our financial giving the past two years, which has not left us in trouble, but which is a pattern we must reverse as we move forward.
- We have tremendous opportunities financially, because of the strong giving of our congregation, the deep involvement of our members, the wise and careful management of our resources, and a new opportunity provided by a bequest of \$1,000,000 left us this past year by a beloved long time member named Gloria Horning.
- Because of our strong sense of financial responsibility, we are initiating an even deeper process to plan for our financial structure and goals over the next three years to see how all our financial resources can work together to support our ministries, our mission efforts in this country and abroad, and the facility in and from out of which they occur.
- In addition, the Session has authorized the Nominating Committee to begin selecting nominees for an Associate Pastor Nominating Committee to provide children and families with ordained leadership in the wake of Casey's departure.

You will be hearing more – and have opportunities to be involved with – our moving forward in the weeks and months ahead. My commitment as Pastor and our commitment as Session and staff are to lead all of us to bring our opportunities and commitments together – like the point on a steeple in a new church logo to be shared with you next week. I believe we can bring our resources together, but it will not be automatic or easy. Neither should it be, given that we are Presbyterians and Calvinists and don't much believe in the effortless life!

III.

On the Sunday morning nearly ten years ago after Karen Bloomberg died, I remember closing my sermon by looking at the congregation, and then looking down at Patrick (both of whom looked so young then) and saying: "A week ago you had four clergy, who loved you, and now you have three." Then I said: "Love is not a matter of quantity, but quality."

For the next year and a half or so, you will have three.

- But Whitney loves you even as she is getting to know your names and faces.
- Patrick loves you even as his role has changed.
- And I love you as I have done since the day I walked into this sanctuary to preach for the first time and said to myself: "I didn't think they still made churches like this."

"For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven."

No matter how much things change, love doesn't.

Amen.