

**What Time is it for West Flamboro?**  
**Ecclesiastes 3:1-15**  
**December 30, 2018**

In Roman mythology Janus was the god of the gates and doors. And here we are at a gateway, one which opens up for us a new year of possibilities and challenges. It is also a gateway that points back. As we stand at the gateway to a new year we are challenged to reflect on the year that has past as well as to envision the one that beckons us into our future.

The god Janus was thought to represent beginnings. This belief comes from the idea that one must emerge through a gate or door before entering a new place. As the god of beginnings, Janus also lent his name to the first month of the year. The god Janus has a distinctive appearance in art, as he is often depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions, back and forward. Some sources claim that the reason Janus was represented in this peculiar fashion was due to the notion that doors and gates look in two directions. In this way, one of the god's faces could look forward, while the other looked backward.

Not many of us ask the really big question, "What am I here for?" "What is the meaning of life?" If we don't ask it formally I suspect somewhere deep inside us there is a lingering uneasiness about this question. At certain points in our lives the question rises to the surface and we find ourselves seeking answers. Some might seek the answer in eastern religions, perhaps even ending up with the Buddhist monks in Tibet for a spiritual retreat. Others might explore one of the cults like Scientology for answers. Some delve into spiritualism or the occult. Others simply press the materialist button even harder to find inner peace and meaning. For those who claim not to believe in any God, their meaning has to be found within themselves or the world. They are comfortable saying that this is all there is and like all evolved species are we are born, we live out our lives and eventually die. There is no grand scheme, no hidden purpose planned out by some supreme being in the sky.

Many philosophers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, both Christian and atheist, found this rational response to the meaning of existence unhelpful. They developed a philosophy called Existentialism. It focused on the deep anxiety of human existence — the feeling that there is no purpose, indeed nothing, at its core. Only faith in God, a faith that involves our deepest passion, will create meaning for us, he argued. Indeed, the existentialists argued that life is absurd. It has no meaning. We must give it meaning.

Our reading from Ecclesiastes sounds so much like the existentialists. Here the wise Soloman begins his treatise on the emptiness of life. He describes the circular nature of life, the meaninglessness of it all and the weariness of life caught in this vice grip of repeated cycles. It's all vanity, he claims. We work, we die, and another picks up the task. Even the universe seems to go in the same endless cycle. There is truly nothing new. And once we pass from the scene we are soon forgotten by the succeeding generations. There is no meaning to be found within nature or within our lives.

Solomon will go on to tell us that he has tried everything in life: riches, relationships, building projects, and pleasure. All of it he concludes is emptiness!

But there is also his teaching on risk taking. He says: *Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back.* (11:1)

Trying to picture this I thought about throwing bread out on the North Sea where I grew up and couldn't see how it was going to come back to me any way but wet, soggy and moldy. My mother would just get mad at me for playing with my lunch. What is Solomon's point here?

So the **first** thing Solomon is saying, I think, is to move forward in life one must take risks. He is thinking of grain exports. Put out to sea with several ships; don't put the entire harvest into one boat. Don't put all your eggs into one basket, in other words. Of course, you could just keep all the grain and make bread; that would be a safe thing to do. Yes, there are risks to sending out ships to trade your goods: pirates, shipwrecks, and unscrupulous traders. But you may also gain a good return on your investment. As the saying goes, "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." Any

venture requires faith, yes, and even church work. So Solomon says, ***don't play it safe—take risks.***

The **second** part of Solomon's advice reinforces the first: we need to guard against being overly cautious. He says: *Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap. In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. (11:4-6)*

We need to seize our opportunities for ministry here and not be controlled by our fears. If the wind or the rain clouds keep us rooted to the spot (small resource base of people and money) then we won't get a decent harvest. Conditions will never be perfect for ministry in any church, especially as we occupy a post-Christian world. We will never have perfect conditions.

Put into a broader context of the teaching of Jesus on discipleship we need to press this teaching on time and the formula for the happy life. He teaches that the one who loses his life gains it back and the one who never stops seeking more of the world endangers losing their very soul. Jesus speaks of the way of the cross. Disciples or followers of Jesus are people who are able to put their lives in perspective. Jesus teaches us that those who try to save their lives, who are self absorbed, lose their lives. And those who live out their lives as servants of Jesus save their lives. This is radical teaching for our generation. (Matthew 16:24-28)

This teaching of Jesus is at odds with much of contemporary life. He seems to be saying to us that if we want to discover the meaning of our lives we need to commit ourselves to a relationship with God through the cross. Following Christ, or living under his Lordship, will mean a drastic change in my priorities and direction in life. Where our society values winning, material success, and status, the Jesus way promotes dying, losing and humility. Jesus reminds us that there is little profit in gaining the whole world of stuff if it means losing our soul. Or if we try to answer the deep questions of life by buying into modernity's obsession with gaining material success, we will find ourselves bankrupt of spiritual life.

Where are you looking for the answer to that fundamental question of existence, what on earth am I here for? In Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, he asks us to begin our search with God, not ourselves.

The question the Ecclesiastes passage raised for me relates to us as a community as well as to us individually. As a community I need to ask through Solomon's words, *what time is it for us?*

A book I read years ago, ***Taking Your Church to the Next Level***, was helpful on the question of where we find ourselves at the end of a year and the beginning of a new one. One of the quotes:

*It's not where you are today that counts. It's where you are headed.*

As I look back with you at 2018 I see so many things for which to give thanks to God. I was surprised and delighted by the opportunity to serve in a congregation once again. It has been a great challenge and blessing for me personally.

How about you West Flamboro? How about you individually and as a community of faith? I know you have gone through challenging times over the past few years. And I am always encouraged to witness your faith and hope as you continue to face the future. As I look back there is so much to give thanks for. As a small congregation your offerings have met the ministry needs in 2018. The many ways you bless this community is testament to your faith and service and to your spiritual health and your trust in God's place for you here in West Flamboro. I think this accomplishment should be celebrated!

So what time is it for you as you look into 2019? Ecclesiastes asks us to consider the time. There is a time for everything. What time is it in your life? For everything there is a season, both for the church and for us as individuals. Where are you today as you stand on the edge of a new year? What is your vision for this community of faith?

**Amen**