***“It’s All In A Lifetime”***

*a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 5, 2024*

*based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

I want to begin with the opening stanzas of a poem I wrote years ago about my daughter who is my only child. It’s called, “The Last Time.”

***The Last Time***

There is a book

that marks my daughter’s

first words,

 first steps,

 first tastes.

Why, then, can’t I remember

the *last* time

I carried her

 upstairs to bed,

the last time

 she called me

daddy, the last time

 I read a picture book

 to her?

I can’t remember

because I didn’t know

it was the last time.

If I’d known,

would I have cried,

 marked the moment

with an extra kiss,

 held her tighter,

 longer?

When many of us in this room today went to Dave Pierce and Michael Hawkin’s river-house a month ago there was no way any of us could have known we were hearing Kenn Willson’s last recital. Kenn certainly had no idea. He told me about other recitals he looked forward to giving, and he also mentioned to Rayin, our Office Coordinator who was also his special church buddy, his intention to maybe buy another piano.

And, of course there was no way we could have known last Sunday that Kenn’s choir accompaniment, and gorgeous Offertory with Gabi Hernandez would be his last gifts to us. It staggers the imagination.

No time to say thank you; no time to say goodbye, or we love you with all our hearts.

The writer of this morning’s reading from Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time for every matter under heaven,” but is there?

Well, to be fair, whoever wrote that book wasn’t saying there would always be time to say, “Goodbye.” In fact the author of that book who looked at life with a cold and clear eye, also said, “Time and chance happen to [us] all.”

“Time happens,” meaning, “stuff happens” to us all.

Well …. Let me say this – nothing Kenn offered us from the piano in the last three years moved me more than what we heard last Sunday.

I’m not just saying this. On Monday I sent him an email saying, “I’ve now watched Gabi’s solo, [‘Give Me Jesus’] four times on YouTube. Your accompaniment on that was sublime. Just exquisite. Thanks for all you do for us !!!”

And he wrote back saying he appreciated that I had noticed and added: “It’s such a joy for me to play for the church, Steven and Gabi!!”

On Tuesday morning as I sat down to write my weekly pastor’s blurb for our Thursday email newsletter I found Gabi’s voice still echoing in my head. I felt so deeply grateful for the emotional depth of that music.

The version of that spiritual, “Give Me Jesus,” arranged by Mark Hayes, begins with the words, “And when I come to die, and when I come to die, give me Jesus.”

Remember?

And the hymn I chose for what we call the “Responsive Hymn” that day was, “Abide With Me.” You know, I chose that and typed it into the order of worship, and then I wondered, “now why did I pick a funeral hymn for worship?

Maybe we know and we also don’t know things. I don’t know. It’s a mystery.

Let me also make a very important acknowledgment: this church has suffered other sudden losses that also brought us all to our knees. Frank Angelo and Jeff Tefelske rush immediately to mind. They are still deeply missed -- every day.

Some others of you have lost suddenly your own special beloved ones, I know.

People die and, if you know them well, if you know who they are uniquely, you know that no one can replace them. No one.

I mean, we can replace our numbers, but no one can quite bring what *they* brought to us that no one else could.

That’s actually written into our Presbyterian essence. It’s part of what makes this denomination distinct. We are encouraged to believe that everyone who is in this community was meant to be here – that the party we are meant to have isn’t a party without you.

Some of you are here to teach us how to dance; some of you are here to teach us how to mourn.

Someone is here because your laugh is so musical, we all love to hear it; someone is here to teach us that’s it’s okay to cry.

Some of you are here to teach us how to build the next iteration of Southminster, while others of you are here to teach us how to let go of what we cling to from the past. All of this is in Ecclesiastes 3, you know -- “there’s a time for building up and a time for letting go.”

We are, all together, a living, breathing embodiment of those words about there being a time for every matter under heaven.

We make that wheel of living turn together and we help one another see the beauty in it by stepping back together every Sunday to behold who we are, and who we are becoming, corporately. That is what “Church” is.

It’s also what Pete Seegar had in mind when he turned Ecclesiastes chapter 3 into the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn” -- the song The Byrds later made into a hit.

Thirty-five years ago I spent half a day in a hospital, sitting with a 70 year-old woman named Marion from Grace Presbyterian Church in the Cully neighborhood of Portland. I was a very green young pastor. She was waiting for bypass surgery. That morning literally changed me forever.

I didn’t know that at the time, but I eventually realized it.

Many years later I wrote a poem about that and I will share a little of it with you now …

{She is} like the shy aunt you never quite got

to know. We wait in pre-op three hours

before the surgeon shows up,

and I take in the word, Mercy,

printed upside-down on his head-wrap.

He repeats what she already knows –

that they cannot determine how many

bypasses she will require until they open her

chest and take a look. He says this

without using the words *open* or *chest*

and makes clear that he has little idea

what surgery might buy her. After a silence

that stings she lifts her eyes to ask

if she might have a heart transplant.

She is aware she is asking for something big –

maybe not the moon, but surely one of the moons

of Jupiter, it has so many. He blushes

with practiced apologies and in a moment

is gone. Any hope in the room bleeds out

and I see abandonment bead up on the glossy

white wall behind her. She reads this …

in my eyes. (“Bypasses” January 2017, The Yale Review)

I will never ever forget her eloquent reflection on what she was going through. As I offered her my empathy, she looked back at me very tenderly and said, “Well, you know, it’s all in a lifetime.”

My friend, Marion didn’t go to, you know, Stanford University. She didn’t even go to college. She didn’t have much of an education, but she understood the wisdom of Ecclesiastes in her bones; that life is a big wheel on which are a thousand different experiences, and it just keeps churning those out until we’ve experienced most, if not all of them.

It’s all in a lifetime. Every single thing. Yes, but it is so often confusing., it is often not what we expect, right? Not what we want.

To wrap your mind around this, think of a labyrinth. A labyrinth is an interactive, medieval machine meant to put us in touch with life at its core. They have one on the stone floor of the thousand year old Cathedral at Chartres, you know, but you can find one at the Grotto in Portland - they are now nearly everywhere .

The labyrinth helps us understand how it feels to locate yourself in every sector of the variety of life’s experiences – all of them except happiness. It helps us navigate loss, suffering, hope, and despair.

If you have walked a labyrinth you will know what I mean. You have the center which represents happiness (or some specific goal) in sight, or so you think. And you find yourself so close to it as you begin your walk, and then as you follow the path, it recedes from you.

Then suddenly there it is again, and, uh oh, you find yourself being taken by the wind miles away, and then, oops, there you are finally where you hoped to be, except you realize the whole thing is NOT about arriving there, but about the crazy rollercoaster journey we’re all on, hopefully, together.

As someone has said, everything in life takes 8 times longer than you thought it would to come to fruition and that is important because there are a thousand different experiences in a lifetime and they are all of them required to be human~~.~~

What I am saying is, that if you are in touch with your own heart and the heart of the world even the part at a distance from what you are looking for can be full of peace.

We are right where we are meant to be no matter what side of “Happiness” we find ourselves occupying at a given moment; and all those moments fold us into God.

Amen