

“There is a time...” Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

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 cast 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 cast 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.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Here we are. The first day of 2023. One more year has hastened away. One year, – that doesn’t sound like much. But a lot of time has gone by. 365 days in our lives. We had them, they were and they are no more and we will never get them back.

When I was studying in a Seminary in Latvia, I had a professor. Dr Guntis Kalme. He used to share with us his helpful insights and thoughts. One of his insights I still remember. Actually, I remember it from time to time.

One day, when he was in Seminary, studying in Graduate School, also in St Louis, he woke up and didn’t feel like saving the world, or killing the dragon, or... even going to the library. He just wanted to relax, to chill a little bit. So, he turned on the TV.

As you know there are many channels on our TVs, and there is something to watch all the time. And once you begin to watch, that screed kind of sucks you in. Time went by, came evening, when he suddenly got anxious.

“Ups... the day has gone and I have done nothing useful. I have just wasted my time.” And that’s where that revelation knocked at his door. As he related it to us, at that moment it was almost like he heard the voice saying to him: “No, Guntis, you didn’t waste your time, you wasted my time.”

“You wasted my time...” That’s it. We don’t usually think about time this way, but nevertheless that is a truthful description of our human situation. We don’t have our time. All the time belongs to the Lord, the Creator of space and time and everything in them, or as we say in our Creed, – “things visible and invisible”.

Every day and every minute of our lives are gifts of our gracious Creator to us, undeserved and underappreciated gifts at that; one more reason to be genuinely grateful. We may possess expensive watches, but we don’t possess any time on our own. None. And there is nothing that compels our God to extend the time given to us.

Just think about it, how many precious gifts of time did you receive this last year? One every morning! And how often do we say: “Thank you, Father, please, help me to use this day for your glory!” But ... in His grace, He just keeps giving these gifts to us.

There is something else that Solomon is teaching us with the words that we heard today. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Then he gives a long list of examples. Did you notice what unites all these examples?

“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...”

And so on, and so on. What unites all of them? All these seasons and times are given and determined by God. We don’t choose them and we don’t determine them. Not a time to be born, not to die, not to weep, not to laugh, not to mourn, not to love, not to hate... all of these are outside of our control. These seasons happen to us.

We want to believe that we are more in control. “Your fate is in your hands!” “You can do whatever you want, you can become whoever you want to be!” We hear these slogans too often. But they are not much more than wishful thinking.

The same is true about the Church. We would like to be in control. We would like things to go our way. But there is a season and a time for every matter. And how rich and diverse is the history of our Church!

Just imagine if we could travel back in time and see and experience all the different seasons and times that generations of Christians before us have experienced?! And I am not talking about going back 50 years.

Then it was the time of union and high hopes. What about a hundred? When many in Australia looked suspiciously at those German Lutherans. What about 200 years ago? How was it to live in Prussia where those in power used all the means available to change the Gospel message that they had received and held dear in their hearts? It kind of reminds us of what is happening right now in the LCA, doesn’t it?

How was it 300 years ago, when suddenly this new thing, science rapidly grew in popularity and more and more voices arrogantly claimed to be able to explain God away. How was it four centuries ago, when the Thirty Years War devastated Europe?

How was it five centuries ago, when some fresh and joyful message from the little town of Wittenberg sent shivers down the spine of the entire Western church? How was it six centuries ago, when Rome, the geographical heart of the Church, was so corrupt that it threatened to burst out because of its promiscuity?

And so on... There is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. Sure, you know that we often want things to be different. Also, in our church we would prefer to see more birth than death, more love than hatred, more unity than division, more building up than tearing down, more growing than shrinking, more laughter and joy, than weeping and mourning, more joining than leaving. But that is not all in our hands.

Please, grant us those good times, O Lord, or at least help us to be grateful and at peace with the times we have!

Now, what is then the advice that the Holy Spirit gives to us through Solomon? It is a very simple one. **“I perceived that there is nothing better [for us] than to be joyful and to do good as long as [we] live; also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.”**

What does this mean? Solomon puts it in slightly different words at the end of this book. **“Fear God, and keep His commandments!”** (Ec. 12:13) We could rephrase it as – **“be joyful** and strive to live according to God’s will for your lives, and take pleasure in what you do – for this is God’s gift to you.” See we are not expected to change the course of civilizations, to convert the nations. Let's leave those up to the Lord.

There is great wisdom and so many blessings in this simple advice. It is not just advice, it is our God’s gift to you in this life, in this time. **“Be joyful!”** But, of course, as we already reflected earlier – everything that we are and everything that we have are gracious gifts of our Creator and Redeemer.

Let’s learn to see our life and everything in it as gifts of this gracious God, let's practice to give thanks for everything, and our joy will multiply. Then, let’s strive to keep God’s commandments! But which ones come first? Which ones are the most important?

Yes, the first three! Fear and love and trust in the Triune God above all things. Obedience to this one fills your life with peace and wisdom. It helps you to see everything, yourselves and the world including, as our God sees it, in all its rich and magnificent beauty.

Then use the gift of God’s name properly. Obedience to this one gives you access to your God; you can call upon Him, pray, praise, and give thanks to Him. He will hear

you. That's His promise to you. Then He sends to proclaim His name to everyone, and to use the power of His name to deliver forgiveness and to change lives. Wow!

Then, enjoy the gift of rest in God's presence. When you keep the 3rd Commandment, you receive from God's hand the time of rest, the rest in His presence, among His people, in the Church, where He Himself comes to be among us and to bless you.

Where He speaks to you, and where we can listen to Him. Where He Himself feeds you forgiveness and eternal life, with bread and wine. As we receive these precious gifts of our God, we proclaim what Jesus Christ has done for us until He comes.

And let us never say that we don't have time for these things. Because, that's just embarrassing. This is God's time that we enjoy, and these are His instructions for how to use the time given to us according to His good will, and for our benefit.

Our Father and our Lord Jesus doesn't ask us to give up something that is ours, He doesn't take anything away from us, He just instructs us how to use properly and wisely the time that He gives to us. He invites us to spend it in His company.

What could be better! And then we get to the rest of the Commandments that reveal what more gifts our God has given to us and teach us God's wisdom how to properly receive these gifts for our benefit and for the benefit of our loved ones.

The gift of parents and the gift of order, the gift of life and of wellbeing, the gift of marriage and of sexual intimacy, the gift of possessions and the gift of good reputation, the gifts of contentment, and gratitude and joy. All given to you.

To receive them, to enjoy them, and to rejoice in them. In this time that our Lord has graciously given to you. Or as Solomon put it, – to take pleasure in your life as you strive to lead it according to the Father's will, – for that is His gift to you.

As we step into 2023, as we are going to receive more and more wonderful and undeserved gifts of our faithful and generous God, may this wisdom of the Holy Spirit guide our lives and our attitudes.

Both living in relationships with our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and also in relationships with one another. And may the presence of our Lord Jesus with us help us to enjoy and to take pleasure in all His wonderful gifts! They are good!

May our dear Lord, if that is His good and holy will, give us in the years to come, many more seasons and times for birth, and for growth, for building up and for reaping, for laughter and for dance. For there is time for everything with our God. There is time...

Blessed this New Year to you, brothers and sisters!

Amen.