

Well, it's hard to believe, but another year has come and gone. It seems like just yesterday that we were saying good-bye to 2022 and celebrating a new year. But here it is December 31st and we are already saying goodbye to 2023. And what a year it has been. Now the older I get the faster time seems to fly. Someone once said that life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer you get to the end, the faster it goes.

Where did all the time go? When you think about time, one of the first scripture texts that comes to mind is from the third chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes, the first eight verse. Let's look at this familiar passage and see what it has to tell us about life and time.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

There's an old saying that time flies when you are having fun, or like one frog said to another: "Time is fun when you having flies!" But time does seem to go by quickly, and before you know it, you're old and gray headed like me. Has that happened to you? Here are some clues that you are getting older:

1. Most of your dreams are reruns.
2. You sit down in a rocking chair and you can't get it started.
3. Your mind makes commitments that your body can't keep.
4. The little old lady you help across the street is now your wife.
5. Everything hurts, and what doesn't hurt, doesn't work anymore.
6. You sink your teeth into a thick juicy steak and they stay there.
7. You watch a pretty girl go by, and your pacemaker opens the garage door.
8. Some people grow up and spread cheer; others just grow up and spread.
9. Few women admit to their age; few men act their age.
10. Your back goes out more than you do.
11. Finally, here's a poem:

My false teeth fit me dandy,  
My hearing aid's just fine,  
My glasses come in handy –  
But I sure do miss my mind.

The Book of Ecclesiastes can be compared to pieces of broken glass. Each piece of glass is like one of the aspects of life mentioned by the author. Initially, he sees life as empty, meaningless, confusing; like pieces of broken glass in a pile on a table. But in the end, he sees that life can take on meaning, and that its pieces can form beautiful meaningful patterns when seen from the right perspective; like small pieces of glass viewed through a stained-glass window.

The author of Ecclesiastes acknowledges that many of the pursuits of life, including wealth, fame, and power, do not really fulfill the basic human need that is deep down inside each of us. Let's face it, we are created in the image of God and there will always be a void in our lives until we come back to God. In the end, Ecclesiastes shows us that life without God is meaningless and leads the reader back to true faith and happiness.

Now this passage from Ecclesiastes contains a lot of practical wisdom for living life. It celebrates the times of our lives, recognizing that there are patterns to life. The author indicates that as we journey through life, we will experience seasons of blessings and seasons of tests. Now if we fall under the false assumption that our life here on earth will be a constant time of blessings, in other words a rose garden, then we are definitely in for a surprise, because life will have its share of tests, as we all know too well.

And by tests, I mean those times when we go through struggles and difficulties. I think that we can all agree that we each have been tested over the past year. Some of these difficult situations were brought on by our own poor decisions and actions. However, there are seasons of life over which we have no control, such as the passing of many of our loved ones and friends this past year. As this morning's text states: "There is a time to be born, and a time to die." We do not have anything to do with our birth, and in a way very little to do with our death. There are also seasons of life that just simply happen and we just have to walk in faith.

With this background on the seasons of life, how would you describe your 2023? How has your year gone? Looking back to January, did you have any idea what was going to happen over the next twelve months? It has been quite a year with good and bad memories. Unfortunately, we have said goodbye to many dear friends and loved ones. On All Saints Sunday we had nineteen candles in memory of those who have gone on ahead of us to be with the Lord. I had the privilege and honor to lead thirteen Celebrations of Life this year; the most in any one year of my twenty-two years of ministry. I am thankful for the faithful witness of these departed saints; they left us a legacy to follow in our walk with the Lord. I want to thank you for your continued support and comfort for the families of these saints. I also want to thank those who have come forward to fill the leadership and service roles of those who are no longer with us.

A lot of us have dealt with various illnesses this past year such as cancer, heart conditions and covid. In addition, many of you have had surgeries. Again, the church has been there to support and encourage us during these difficult times.

Many people in our community are suffering through some difficult times and the church has answered Jesus' call to love your neighbor through our many mission projects. The Pantry has provided food to a record number of families this year. We continue to reach out to the

homeless in the International Zone in Albuquerque. And the demand for food packages for local students under the Feed New Mexico Kids program continues to increase.

On the positive side, we have seen an increase in worship attendance, membership and giving. Our mission program has expanded to mission trips to St. Joseph Mission School and support for Pastor Chris Davis in Gallup and the Navajo Nation. Due to your generosity, we met our goal of 133 shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child, provided 50 Thanksgiving boxes to Haven House, hams to the clients of the Pantry, 41 Christmas gift cards to the students at St. Joseph, and 40 Christmas stockings to the children of the Gallup Nazarene Church. We are also blessed with so many volunteers who have stepped forward to serve the Lord.

On the national and world stage, we have seen the war in Ukraine continuing, conflict in the Middle East, and the rise of hatred and antisemitism, violence, and division in our country to the level that I have never seen in my lifetime. Unfortunately, it appears that this will continue into 2024. We will also have to endure the nightly news and political campaigns for another presidential election. Now I don't know what else is going to happen in 2024; your guess is as good as mine. But I am sure one thing and that is that God has brought us through 2023 and He will also carry us through the coming year. Remember what Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20 – “And remember I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Who can ask for any more than that as we begin a new year.

This morning, we stand at the gateway to a new year; a year with new opportunities and challenges. Now as an old highway engineer, I always look at a new year as a road to travel. Right now, we can only see the horizon, but we know from experience that the coming year will have its ups and downs. There will be hills to climb and valleys to cross. And there will be some complex and confusing turns in the road to test our patience and knowledge.

As we approach 2024, God offers each of us an opportunity to be thankful for our many blessings, to forget our regrets and disappointments, to restore broken relationships, to be healed of our pains and to relieve us of our fears. In the third chapter of Philippians, the Apostle Paul who had his share of seasons of blessings and seasons of testing, advises us to forget what is past and focus on what is ahead of us. Jesus gives us the power to turn every sorrow into a song, every hurt into a hallelujah, and every test into a blessing. This is the miracle of God's grace.

As the author of Ecclesiastes discovered as he took stock of his life, life without God is meaningless. There are many seasons of life, but we can be sure of one thing, the only true joy and purpose in life can only be found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As I look back over my life, I have found that I have been able to traverse the rough spots in the road of life because of my personal relationship with the Lord. He has been there for me in times of

celebration and in times of sadness; in times of stability and in times of transition; in good times and in bad times. When you stop and look back over your life, you soon realize that all the money, fame, success and whatever in life doesn't mean a thing compared to your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

I found a story that reaffirms what Paul was trying to say in Philippians. On one New Year's Eve a guy filled with a sense of reckless abandon and adventure, shed all his clothes, and went for a midnight swim in the moonlit ocean off the coast of Mexico. He knew that when he left his clothes and self-consciousness behind on the beach that he was about to fully immerse himself in the beauty of God's nature.

The question for us this morning is – why don't we join him. Now I don't mean going skinny-dipping in the Rio Grande. But discarding all the things that are holding us back from truly growing closer to the Lord in the coming year and fully immersing ourselves in God's grace; you know getting rid of all that old baggage: hurts, pains, failures, regrets, disappointments, bitterness, grudges, and fears about the future. As our text says, now is the time to throw away.

Now I have found over my life that if you look for the worst in any situation and anticipate that the coming year will be worse than 2023, then you will get what you expect. However, if you look for the good in everything, walk in faith and anticipate the blessings of God, 2024 will be a great year. What the new year brings us will depend a great deal on what we bring to the new year. In other words, make the best of each and every day that God gives you and live each day to the fullest.

Tomorrow, we have the opportunity for a new start, an opportunity to forget the past year and step out in faith into a new year. Tomorrow is like the first blank page in a 365-page book. Write a good one. This week, take the opportunity to give the Lord all your regrets, hurts, pains, sorrows and fears, and ask His blessings and presence during the coming year. Give God control of the seasons of your life and see what great things He will do with them. Each day draws us closer to the coming of the Lord, either the end of time or our death. Are you prepared to meet the Lord? Make Jesus Christ the focus of your life this year and see the difference it will make in not only your life, but all those around you.

Because of the birth of Jesus Christ that we celebrated this past Monday and His Resurrection that we will celebrate in March, we have the assurance that we do not make this journey through life alone. God carried us through 2023 and He will definitely carry us through 2024; so, don't live in fear and worry, instead just walk in faith and trust in Him. Remember the best is yet to come. Happy New Year!