

What Time Is It?
December 31, 2017
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
5 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

This reading from Ecclesiastes is a beautiful piece of poetry but I think it is missing a line. I would like to add: a time for watching Hallmark Christmas movies and a time to refrain from watching Hallmark Christmas movies. I have to confess I have watched my share this year: Coming Home for Christmas, Christmas in Evergreen, The Christmas Train, The Christmas Cottage, The Christmas Getaway, A Christmas Detour, A Crown for Christmas, The Mistletoe Inn, Sleigh Bells Ring, Switched at Christmas. The question is; “why?” They all follow a standard formula, they all include snowball fights and ice skating, they all celebrate small town charm, and most of them involve a city slicker or workaholic who has lost his or her Christmas spirit. One night I fell asleep watching a Hallmark movie. When I woke back up it took me 15 minutes to realize I was watching a different movie.

These movies are like fingernails on a chalkboard to my husband. They make him crazy. “How can you watch this?” “Haven’t you seen this one?” “Is she in every one of these?” He had something to say every time he walked into the room. I couldn’t explain it. I didn’t want to watch the news or the comedy channel talking about the news. I wanted to slip away into a world where finding the perfect tree for the town square was the biggest problem people were facing.

On December 10, my husband sent me an email, because that is what married people do, that said, “You’re not alone...” in the subject line. The body of the email was a link to an article in the Washington Post titled, **“We can’t take any more of 2017, so we’ve turned to the Hallmark Channel in desperation!”**¹

The author, Monica Hesse, wrote this about this alarming trend, *“We would typically be the first person to mock the idea of the Hallmark Channel, but there is something specific about this December: It’s xxxx. The news stinks, current events stink — turning on the television, in general, stinks.*

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/we-cant-take-any-more-of-2017-so-weve-turned-to-the-hallmark-channel-in-desperation/2017/12/07/1ad3dab6-d6ca-11e7-b62d-d9345ced896d_story.html?utm_term=.923f1b14115e

- *Another beloved icon revealed to be a sexual predator? Nope — let's watch Hallmark.*
- *Another North Korean missile, now deemed capable of hitting the United States? Nope — Hallmark.*
- *The president is retweeting fake video clips of — NOPE, LA LA LA LA. HALLMARK. HALLMARK. HALLMARK.*

“It’s like, Hallmark or Prozac?” offers Julie Miner, an adjunct professor of public health at George Mason University and one of the many people who, for reasons they cannot fully explain, are watching a truckload of Hallmark this season. “Like, I don’t want to take anti-depressants, but at this point in 2017, it’s that or its Hallmark.”

Anyone here been watching Hallmark movies? It would be funny if it weren’t so absolutely devastating. The environment, civil discourse, social safety nets for the most vulnerable, health care, and civil rights are all under attack...while the rich prosper. Slavery, starvation, malnutrition, homelessness, dislocation, terrorism, war, and poverty still plague the planet. We are starting to swim in a slurry of our own stuff and garbage, that other humans labor to grow or make, and we discard it without a thought. We work more, stress more, and have more but we are not happier. So much is wrong we don’t know where to begin...<click> Hallmark Channel.

The writer of Ecclesiastes gets it. If Hallmark would have been cranking out movies in the third century BCE, I’m sure he would have included a time for watching Hallmark Christmas movies. He was as fed up with the world around him as many of us are. He begins the book with the memorable phrase “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” It’s all *hebel*, that’s the Hebrew word for it. Today we might say it’s all gone to pot. There really isn’t a good translation for it. It is disgust and disillusionment with a spoonful of frustration: *hebel*. It’s all *hebel*.

The frustration was the fact that the good and just suffered while the wicked prosper.

He was also frustrated that wisdom was lost on the powerful. In Chapter 9 he includes this proverb:

¹⁷The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one bungler destroys much good. (Eccl. 9:17-18)

The author, introduced as the teacher, in the first chapter, is cranky. He is venting about the injustice he sees. He is venting about feeling powerless to affect change. He is venting about fools in charge. He is articulating what his readers feel. All is *hebel*.

Yet the Book of Ecclesiastes is more than one long rant. It serves as a corrective to some misguided thinking. In the ancient world there was the prevailing view that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. That’s how the world worked. That’s how God works. If things are bad it is because you are bad. It is not too different from the prosperity gospel preached today by Joel Osteen, Paul and Jan Crouch, Creflo Dollar, TD Jakes, Paula White, Joyce Meyer and a host of others who preach that the faithful are blessed financially by God. Poverty and sickness are considered a curse. Salvation is easily obtained, but to be faithful financial giving is required. You give to get. Every generation has had its expression of this thinking. It is easy to get sucked into it. It is easy to think that God blesses the faithful – or that everything happens for a reason. The problem with this

thinking is that it fails to explain why faithful people struggle and suffer. Like Job's friends, the only answer to suffering is, "You must have done something wrong."

The teacher offers a different answer. With the beauty of poetry, he offers hopeful words to the disheartened. Life has seasons...and a time for every matter. Our job is to be mindful of the time. When times are good it is important to live in appreciation, making the most of that time, knowing that the time will change. When times are bad it is important to persist, and resist, knowing that this too shall pass. And regardless of the time, he affirms the importance of shared meals and laughter. This is of more value than a heap of riches.

I love how one commentator sums up the message of the poem. She writes, "...we cannot let ourselves be crushed by the present or worry ourselves with insane anxiety about the future. There is no point in living disillusioned and frustrated all the time...we must receive life as a gift from God and take advantage of the gratifying moments that humanize, even when they seem insignificant."²

The "Countdown the Christmas" (a Hallmark movie reference) is over. The time for watching Hallmark movies has ended. The time for strengthening our resolve to work for and celebrate the beloved community has begun.

I looked up the word resolution the other day. A resolution is a firm decision to do or not do something. Today, many of us are putting the finishing touches on our resolutions for the coming year. It is an opportunity for us to discern this time and our response to this time as people of faith. I am inspired this New Year's Eve Day by Jim Wallis. He is a New York Times bestselling author, a public theologian, a speaker, the founder and editor of Sojourners magazine, and an international commentator on ethics and public life. He is pretty good at knowing what time it is. Last week he published his ten resolutions for the new year. I offer them to you for your consideration:

- 1. To start each day with a "yes!" to my faith — and to my personal and public morality.**
- 2. To have the courage to say "no!" when that is required, wherever it is required.**
- 3. To *not* wait to say "no," or wait to stand in opposition to wrong and dangerous ideas and actions, until I see how others will respond.**
- 4. To hold the Bible in one hand and the news in the other as I go through each day.**
- 5. To better answer the biggest challenges of 2018 by acting on my faith, rather than reacting from my emotions.**
- 6. To see crisis as both danger and opportunity.**
- 7. To see evil and injustice as a call to go deeper.**
- 8. To spend even more time with my family.**
- 9. To pray for particular people who will be playing critical roles in the outcomes of political events in this country.**
- 10. To work and pray to grow in my trust of God, friends, and community.**

He concludes, "Even if life in this country continues to spiral morally downward, I will try to trust in faith, hope, and love — to believe the greatest of these is love — and to be ready every day to act, by faith, in hope, upon what I believe."

² Tamez, Elsa. 2001. "Ecclesiastes: a reading from the periphery." *Interpretation* 55, no. 3: 250-259. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (accessed December 29, 2017).

Jim Wallis speaks with the same realism and confidence as the author of Ecclesiastes. Regardless of the season, and whatever the time, God is with us and God is gracious In God we trust.