

**Time After Time**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras**  
**June 14, 2020**

*Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, 3:1-11*

In Downeast Maine, where my parents live, there is something called “The Great Maine Lumberjack Show” which features these incredible athletes doing amazing feats of wood carving with axes and chainsaws. One of the more well-known athletes is a woman named “Timber Tina”. When my son was ten, we took him to see the show, and he saw her handle the chainsaw he was star struck. Imagine his delight when she called him up on stage so he could take a closer look!

Later that year, we had a microburst in our Trumbull backyard that knocked out several trees, crushed both our cars in the driveway, and took out a corner of the house and detached garage. We lost power for about a week. It was a huge mess! The downed trees obstructed our driveway, so we pulled out our chainsaw to try and remove it.

If you’ve ever used a chainsaw for a big job you know that at the beginning, everything works really easily, the blade is sharp and it cuts through the branches like butter. After a little while your arms get tired (in our case probably only 15 minutes later), and the saw blade gets a little duller, and things become a harder to manage.

So, here you are, with this power tool that could do real damage to you if you slip, but you’re using it as every muscle aches. You have no choice but to be fully present in the moment, fully aware of where your hands are, where your legs are, how you are breathing and so on. One small mistake could be very dangerous. Blades could slip, pieces of wood can go flying. The preciousness of life – my own – the preciousness of my fingers, arms, legs and feet becomes very clear.

The normal kind of mindless fluff you might think about when performing a task like this, your career ambitions, relationship problems, worries about next month or next year flee from your mind. There is only the here and now, the immediacy of the blade and how sore your arms and back are.

But there was also a feeling of deep satisfaction, and gratitude, once that yard was cleared. In our case, friends showed up to help. We worked together as a family. And we gained a new appreciation for the power of nature, and power of God’s creation that is still unfolding.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes a time when she lost power on their farm in Georgia because of an ice storm. She and her husband had to draw water from a nearby well. They had to warm the water for the horses and other outdoor animals. She was determined to treat the power outage as a spiritual practice. Her focus turned to the basics of eating and drinking, sources of heat, staying warm enough to stay alive, in the absence of all the conveniences of modern life; conveniences that otherwise shelter us from our primal needs.

She developed a new awareness for those people in the world and in our cities that don't have the option, or luxury to treat a power outage as a spiritual practice, but face the brutal elements of nature daily, and go hungry at night. The physicality of her experience drew her closer to God, and God's hope for all people.

She returns often to the grace of physical labor – sometimes in her garden, sometimes in volunteer work. This kind of work gets us out of our heads and into our bodies again, bringing an awareness of the grace and miracle of our bodies. And a renewed focus on our immediate needs – food, water, clothing, shelter, and the needs of others.

Our Giving Garden out back bears witness to the miracles of nature, and the gifts and bounty of God's creation in the earth. And it bears witness to the hunger of people in our community. I hope you all take a moment to go and see what the team have planted this year. By the end of the summer, beans, squash, zucchini, and tomatoes will be harvested and given to the Monroe Food Pantry and urban feeding programs like the Bridgeport Rescue Mission. It's a miracle when life-giving food comes forth from the dirt and goes to someone who really needs it.

If you feel like you have been drawn into a quest for future glory, future accomplishments, future expectations at the cost of your life in this moment... go put your hands in the dirt. Feel the power of the soil, feel the burn of your muscles.

And if can't get your mind off the worries or dreams of the future. Don't use the dishwasher tonight, wash the dishes by hand in a basin of water. Slowly pay attention as you place each plate carefully in the drainer and give thanks for the water as you try to preserve it. Wonder about the gifts of the food you have just eaten and be glad and give thanks.

Or go find a project that requires a chain saw.

What I really appreciate about the author of Ecclesiastes is he didn't look at the world through rose-colored glasses. We know – some of us more than others – the same sort of things the writer lifts up, that life isn't always fair. Most of the things we count on in this world will sooner or later fade away.

Life is uncertain. Sometimes irrational. Often ironic. What we believe to be coming to us in the future can't be pinned down or grasped or counted on to unfold in predictable ways. That's how he starts his book – declaring that all of life is like *that*.

And yet... the sun still rises and sets. The wind blows around and around. Streams continually run to the sea. That's just what they do. There's really nothing new under the sun. There *are* times of war and times of peace, just as there are times of mourning and times of dancing, times of love and times of hate, times of breaking down and times of building up. The world around us is wonderful *and* awful, it's filled with moments of bitter grief and profound joy.

We know there are seasons we will move through as individuals. In any given group of people, on any given day of the week, you'll likely find those who are celebrating new life, and people who are concerned about the end of life, people who are struggling, and people who are deeply content.

There are seasons we move through as a congregation too – we're moving through a challenging one today! Unable to all physically all be together the way we'd like to be. Unable to sing together, or share a cup of coffee and conversation. Unable to offer each other the most simple act of comfort and hospitality, a hug.

And even before this pandemic, we've been deeply grieved to watch the health of beloved longtime members deteriorate this year; we've had to say farewell to a number of these dear friends, too.

But we've also rejoiced together at the gift of new life and celebrated the addition of wonderful new members to our church family. Endings and new beginnings. You've risen up to care for one another in ways that are safe, through phone calls and e-mails, texts and cards and zoom gatherings.

No matter how exhilarating, confusing, or infuriating life may be from one day to the next, remember that the sun will rise and it will set, the wind will blow, those streams will keep running to the sea, and—more importantly—God will stand firm through it all. Time after time. Thanks be to God! Amen.