

“Is It Time Yet?”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11a, Jeremiah 29:11-1

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Skit: Is it time yet? Just as the people in the skit reacted to the question, “Is it time yet?” in different ways, we respond to it differently as well...some bored, some anxious, some not interested, some distracted, and some intently. “Is it time yet?” That simple question rings with possibilities, some significant and others more subtle...like changing the way our legs are crossed! January seems to be the time when institutions large and small, look back over the last year, the accomplishments, changes and challenges, while looking ahead to the next year. In the last couple of weeks, we’ve had the State of the State and the State of the Union addresses, on a very minor scale, this unusual sermon is somewhat like a “State of Covenant.” Just like the Israelites in the Old Testament, who repeatedly reflected back on what God had done in their lives, it is helpful and inspiring for us as a community of faith to periodically reflect on what God has done in our lives. The wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes tells us “there is a time for everything.” This morning is a time for us to look back on where we’ve been as a community of faith in 2009 and to look ahead to the exciting possibilities for Covenant in 2010.

Looking back over 2009, it was a year of challenges, changes and accomplishments. It began with a significant challenge. In January 2009, we faced a \$92,000 deficit between our challenge budget and pledges received. On January 21st of last year, the Session met to reconcile the budget by cutting the mission, personnel and program expenses as it had been done in the past. The question “is it time yet”...time to address this situation, echoed in many minds. It was decided it was time to address this financial challenge. The Session highly motivated sprang into action meeting for two Saturdays to begin a discernment process for Covenant. Asking these important questions...who are we? Who are we called to be? And how are we called to serve? This discernment process was filled with energy, enthusiasm and faithful commitment in seeking God’s plan and purposes for Covenant. One result was the desire for a three to five year plan for our financial stability and sustainability. One action toward this plan was to initiate a year round approach to stewardship starting this year.

The timing for our discernment process, however, was changed with Steve Minnema’s call to a new ministry last May. This significant change in our staff meant that it was a time to wait. The next step of involving the congregation in the discernment process was “put on hold” as we spent the month of May celebrating God’s ministry with us through Steve Minnema’s many gifts and years of service. It was then time for us to receive the inherent gift of copastoring, that being when one copastor leaves the remaining pastor assumes the full responsibilities once shared as Head of Staff. The wisdom of the writer of Ecclesiastes guided me as I continued throughout the summer to ask the question... “Is it time yet?” Asking it in these three categories, one, “is it time to talk with congregation about the challenges and changes we were experiencing.” “No, not yet.” Two, “Is it time yet.” No, it was not time in the summer or the fall to move forward with any additional pastoral staff. The Session and I decided not to secure any additional pastoral leadership in consideration of our financial challenge of 2009. And the third category “Is it time, yet?” Time to continue the discernment process we began in the spring...no, it wasn’t time yet...it was still time to wait.

The prophet Isaiah says, “those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.” Waiting allowed Covenant’s faithful responses to these challenges and changes lead to significant accomplishments and blessings. It was time to praise God our Shepherd for guiding us in grace. It was time for us to reaffirm our baptismal identities as we spent the summer focusing on “Receiving the Spirit and Embracing our Gifts” as individuals and as a community of faith called to love God and others by using our God given gifts for building up the church and serving the world. It was time to look at the mystery of grace as in the fall, we watched for the ways and times that “Grace Happens.” Through these times, you, the Covenant community, lived the time to be faithful experiencing and expressing your faithfulness responding to God’s faithfulness in many ways including attendance in worship that did not decline in 2009 which often happens when there is a financial challenge or change in a pastoral staff. It was a time to be faithful...in worship and in service...and we were!

Briefly, those are some of the main events in our life together as a community of faith in 2009. “Is it time yet.” It’s time. It’s now time to look ahead to some exciting possibilities for Covenant in 2010. Easy to list as ABC: they include A: a time for renewed awareness, B: a time for balance and C: a time for cognition on the exterior of the cube, or more simply said, a time for thinking outside the box.

Is it time yet? Yes, yes it’s time. It’s time for renewed awareness...this challenge faces most institutions including churches. The day after the Haiti earthquake, I was listening to a White House reporter who said, President Obama was busy moving from one situation room to another...the crisis in Haiti, healthcare reform, terror, the economy. The participants in each room fully invested in each of their respective areas, expected the same from the President, but the President had to leave one room and go to another in seeking to serve the whole, confident that those in each room were doing their jobs. So while he is focusing on the economy...the terror situation room was working, while he is in the terror situation room, the healthcare reform room continued to explore possibilities. I thought how helpful would it be if each person in those situation rooms had to do what the President was doing going from room to room They would have a greater awareness and maybe even appreciation of one another’s work for the common good.

On a very minute scale, this parallels what life is like in a church. We have different groups passionate about different “situations” meeting faithfully for the furthering of God’s love, peace and justice in each of their areas but sometimes forgetting that others have a different call...just as important...just as beneficial...just as essential to the overall health and wellbeing of the whole church...each one serving for the glory of God and the common good. One room might be worship. Another adult education. Another youth. Another music. Another health cabinet. Another children. Another ministry to gays and lesbians. One room might be mission...and in that mission room their might be doors leading to other smaller rooms of Haiti, Guatemala, Human Trafficking, Dane County United.

Last Spring in the Session’s discernment process one powerful insight was that Covenant had many great ministries and programs each one like a delicious slice of a Hubbard Ave pie but sometimes we forget that we are a part of the whole pie! The Apostle Paul’s image of this was that of a body. The way Paul put it was we can’t all be a hand or an eye...but he reminded us we

are all connected to the head...Jesus Christ...the head of the church. For Covenant, 2010 is a time for renewed awareness and affirmation of our many diverse gifts and callings as together we love and serve God and others in and through this place.

Is it time yet? Yes, it's time. It's time for greater balance. We started last year with a financial challenge, this year we start with a financial celebration. I'll let Elder Doug Poland give you the details in the Session Update but your faithfulness in responding to the Session's appeal has more than closed our \$46,000 gap in our budget which will enable us to continue with God's dynamic ministry and mission through Covenant without making any additional cuts. And this year we will conclude our second capital campaign retiring a debt of well over a million dollars, freeing us to begin anew. Last year at our congregational meeting we shared that we needed to work together to ascertain how to balance the three critical portions of our budget: personnel, mission and stewardship of our church buildings and grounds. Is it time yet? Yes, it is time. It's time to continue this essential work of putting a plan in place so that we can work the plan for our financial strength in the years to come, faithfully worshipping and serving as we are called to witness to God's love and light. We will invite an interim to join us in continuing our discerning process knowing the wisdom a fresh pair of eyes and ears can bring. Al Crist/Chip Hunter will tell us about where we are in the interim search process during our Session Update later in the service.

Is it time yet? Yes, it's time. It's time for us to think outside the box. We are a healthy congregation engaged in dynamic ministry and exciting mission. We are a generous congregation. We are a vibrant community committed to growing in grace and serving in love. Are there ways we can improve so that God's ministry and mission in and through us can be enhanced; absolutely! I can think of many, I'll name three. Thinking outside the box, thinking inside the box, how can our ministry and mission in Madison be enhanced? God has given us many blessings...how else can we share them with others as well as one another. Covenant is blessed to be a community that values different theological perspectives. We engage in mutually respectful conversations. We encourage one another to ask questions as we grow in faith seeking understanding. People are looking for that...is it time for us to look for new ways to share who we are with our Madison community. Yes, it's time!

A second example, Covenant started as a community church fifty-five years ago by people in their 20's and 30's. Today we don't have many 20 and 30 "somethings" without children active in our congregation. Is it time to prayerfully consider how we can change that...our discernment process will help us address this...but it will require us to think inside and outside the box. And the third example was raised by an article in the Sunday December 20th Wisconsin State Journal. The front page that day had a full article on another church in town that has thousands attending worship on a Sunday morning. A couple of people asked me, "How do they do it?" I appreciated that question but I raised a different one. "What draws you to worship?" That said, are there ways we can enhance and enrich our worship that would be more welcoming to other people joining us while still honoring our traditions? And is it time yet, to do so? That's a question worthy of discernment as we think about our worship and our life together inside and outside the box in 2010.

I cannot share all my dreams and prayers for Covenant in one sermon. But it is time for me to let you that with all my heart, I believe and trust the words of the prophet Jeremiah hold true for us, for Covenant. "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." 2010 promises to be an exciting year for us as together we continue to discover God's plan and to discern what time it is. Amen!