

A Time to Speak

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[sermon link](#)

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

As a folk rock fan and a child of the 70s, I was raised on the Byrds' song *Turn! Turn! Turn!* which interpreted this scripture as an anti-war anthem just as protests of the Vietnam war were escalating in the late 60s.

As I was reading scripture and meditating on my time together with you this morning, my eyes fell on this passage and, as familiar as it is – I came to the text with new eyes for seeing and new ears for hearing things that I had not before.

Ecclesiastes, along with Job, the Psalms, Proverbs and the Song of Songs is part of what is known as the “wisdom literature” in the Hebrew Bible. This is a category or genre of writing that is thought to be written by sages or wise people to offer moral guidance or instruction for right living to its readers. And while Ecclesiastes identifies King Solomon as its author, a ruler whose reputation for wisdom and sagacity is and was widely renowned, few scholars believe that Solomon was the actual author of the text.

Regardless of the author, the text presents a king of Israel musing about life. The first chapter opens with such meditation on the paradoxes of life as “a generation goes and a generation comes but the earth remains forever” and then the author goes on to reflect on the futility of seeking after wisdom in this world, because knowledge and wisdom often lead to sorrow for after all, the author notes, the very pursuit of wisdom itself is vanity.

And when the king pursues pleasures and accumulates wealth, power, and satisfies his every desire – he is still left with the insight that all is vanity. In fact, concern for vanity and a message of deep humility before God is the overarching wisdom offered throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Ultimately, we come to know that wisdom and wealth and power are all forms of pride and arrogance because, after all, like the whole of the natural world, we are merely mortal creatures doomed to die. Death is the great leveler and we are all equal before God.

It is following this cynical assessment of the human condition that we find today's text. It is written as a poem and we know that the poetry in the Bible is some of the oldest material in the text. You see, poems were often set to music or passed down in other forms of oral tradition and so authors would insert these bits of ancient wisdom into their texts when they fit their narrative arc.

So, why does our author put this poem here?

Of course, we cannot know the mind of the ancients. But it is an interesting question. While the writer seems intent on instructing their readers that most human pursuits of wisdom or engagement in hard work or amassing of wealth and power are ultimately futile, this passage, this poem offers an interlude of hope, perhaps the wisdom that all is not futile. Perhaps the message is that we need to learn to listen and live in God's time and not our own.

As I pondered this text and what it has to say to us today, there were so many of its fragments that resonate with me when I think about our topic of reproductive justice. I am gripped by the notion that our lives, like the earth, pass through seasons. While the seasons of our lives and our communities may not be as regular as the four seasons, there is comfort and challenge in discerning what season we are in and to know that different seasons mark different times for every matter under heaven.

And so, it is important to discern the signs of the times so that we are able to recognize what time it is and act accordingly. Here are just a few of the signs of the times that bear upon the issue of reproductive justice:

- Almost half of all pregnancies in this country are unplanned
- The maternal mortality rate of black women is 3.3 times that of white women and rising
- 50-60% of women used contraceptives the month they got pregnant and roughly 1.6 million unplanned pregnancies a year are due to contraceptive failure
- 26 abortion bans have been enacted in 12 states so far in 2019
- Almost 50% of Americans think that abortion is morally wrong
- Right-wing Christian voices monopolize the public sphere and preach that abortion is murder, shaming and judging millions of women in this country

- 25% of women will have an abortion by the age of 45

It seems fairly clear to me that this is not a time for Christians who support women's reproductive health and freedom to be silent but rather quite the opposite.

I think that now is the time for us to speak.

If you are like many Christians who have been silent for too long, you may be wondering “but what should I say?”

I want to offer you three messages that you can share in public as Christians who support reproductive justice:

1. Parenting is sacred
2. Abortion can be a moral good
3. This church respects and trusts women

First: Parenting is sacred

Women who have ordinary abortions in this country, the “I don't want to have a baby” abortions are regularly making morally significant decisions that honor the sacred responsibility of mothering. And these women have a lot to teach us about motherhood.

There is [ample evidence](#) that these women approach their unplanned pregnancies in morally serious ways, deeply informed by a realistic understanding of what mothering requires, and thoughtful about both their existing moral obligations and their personal, fiscal, and emotional limitations as they consider their pregnancies. Sixty percent of them already have at least one child and most of the rest will go on to have a child later in life.¹ Studies consistently show that women who have abortions weigh a wide variety of factors as they consider what to do when faced with an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy.²

The task of mothering is arguably the most important social task and moral responsibility that humans undertake. In most cultures it is mothers who are responsible for teaching children how to be human—how to eat, crawl, walk, listen, talk, share, communicate, love, be loved, and a host of other moral and material tasks.

While fathers are also capable of sharing these responsibilities (and are increasingly doing so in some spaces and places), for most of human history and in most households today, it is mothers who shoulder the lion's share of this moral, emotional, and physical labor. In fact, while [recent time studies](#) of working mothers and fathers in the United States found that fathers have nearly tripled the time they spend caring for children since 1965, the same study found that mothers' parenting time remains double that of fathers.

¹ [Eighty-six percent](#) of women in the United States will have a child by age forty-four.

² In fact, 89 percent identified at least two factors of concern, 72 percent at least three, and the median number of [contributing factors](#) that women reported evaluating in considering whether to continue their pregnancy was four.

Most of the women who have ordinary abortions do so precisely because they take the moral and social task of mothering very seriously in considering whether they are willing and able to continue a particular pregnancy. This is also true of women who choose not to have children. There are a growing number of women (and men) who do not want to have children, who do not feel called to the sacred task of parenting, or who do not feel that the world needs more children. Recognizing the real power and sacred value of mothering means that pregnancy and motherhood cannot be forced on women. If we truly honor parenting as a sacred task, then motherhood must be something that women are able to freely choose and to reject.

In saying no to a particular pregnancy, women are often saying yes to other visions of wholeness and abundant life – sometimes for existing children, sometimes for families or marriages, and sometimes they are saying “yes” to a vision of a whole and abundant future life for themselves. This is what rankles the patriarchy – that women might affirm the value of their own abundant life more than they value the potential for life represented by a pregnancy.

I am a mother. However, I am not *only* a mother. Like all women, I embody a number of identities including professor, wife, daughter, friend, ordained minister, writer, scholar, and others. And while I have moral commitments and obligations in each of these roles and relationships in my life, it is my identity as a mother that carries the most profound moral consequences. The responsibility to nurture, love, and teach those little beings how to be human, how to love, and how to honor the sacred – that is indeed a sacred trust.

I have been pregnant four times, given birth twice, and had two abortions. The fact that the social, physical, and moral well-being of children is primarily the responsibility of parents meant that my husband and I thought carefully and deeply about our decisions to have and not have children. And I can say, without a doubt, that the two decisions we made to have children were far more significant moral decisions than the decisions to end two pregnancies.

Ending a pregnancy that one is not ready or able to commit to is a responsible choice on the part of a pregnant woman and it reflects a deep respect for children and the challenges associated with parenting. One woman said, “You know, I’m 19 years old. I don’t think I should be having a child right now. I should be more focused on what I’m trying . . . I’m trying to do things for myself. How am I supposed to do something for another human?”³

Recognizing and affirming that parenting is a sacred responsibility means that we need to recognize the moral wisdom my momma shared with me, “You shouldn’t have a baby just because you are pregnant – you should have a baby because you want to be a mother, you want to have a family.”

That is the message that people of faith need to shout from the rooftops.

Second: Abortion can be a moral good

³ Ibid.

In a world where the dominant Christian voices insist that abortion is morally wrong, it is time for Christians to say loudly and clearly that abortion can be a moral good.

Based on Christian principles that promote abundant life, seek justice, and recognize the human dignity of women – the decision to end a pregnancy can be a morally good decision. Christian values that support healthy and secure families also require careful, thoughtful, and morally rich consideration about the decision to become a parent and the decision not to become a parent.

Ending a pregnancy when one cannot afford to care for a child (or another child) can be a morally responsible decision.

Ending a pregnancy when one is not emotionally or physically able or ready to mother a child can be a morally responsible decision.

Ending a pregnancy that will interrupt one's education or career, the very tools that enable people in our culture to prepare themselves to live stable and productive lives can be a morally responsible decision.

Ending a pregnancy in the midst of an abusive relationship, a failing marriage, a job loss, a health crisis, or any number of other reasons can be a morally responsible decision for a woman (and her partner) who want to be able to provide a stable and healthy family situation for their children.

When we begin our conversation from the perspective of reproductive justice – we can recognize that healthy and thriving women are necessary for healthy and thriving families. We can see that reproductive justice requires that women who have babies feel emotionally, physically, and financially able and ready to care for children and raise families. When we remember that parenting is a sacred gift then it is easier to recognize that our public discussion around limiting women's access to abortion is really a conversation about forced pregnancy and childbirth.

Third: This church respects and trusts women

What is missing in public life today are the voices and presence of Christian leaders and people of faith who will stand up and speak out in support of respecting women as full moral agents, created in the image of God, and capable of making the important moral decisions that shape their lives, their families, and their futures.

Across the state of Texas, congregations are declaring themselves reproductive justice congregations by publicly affirming:

In this sacred space we. . .

*Respect and trust women.

*Promise that women who attend our congregation will be free from stigma, shame or judgment for their reproductive decisions, including abortion.

*Believe access to comprehensive and affordable reproductive health service is a moral and social good.

The RJ movement was born in 1994 when a group of 12 black women gathered at a Clinton healthcare reform conference and shared their concerns about the inadequacy of the focus on abortions rights that tends to dominate white feminist conversations about abortion. As they talked together and shared stories of their communities, their social movements, and their own lives, they agreed – of course rights are important, we need abortion rights. But rights aren't enough! What good is a right if you are not able to exercise that right?

Yes, they said, abortion needs to be legal, but how much does that matter if you don't have enough money for the procedure? Or you will lose your job if you take off work to go to the clinic? But even more importantly – what happens after your children are born? Can women find affordable housing where they can raise their children or communities where their children can grow up safe from gun violence or immigration raids? Or what about women who struggle with infertility but don't have health insurance? Or women and children who live with incest or domestic violence. All of these things are part of women's reproductive lives and they have nothing to do with the legal right to access abortion.

So, yes, they said, we want reproductive rights, but we also want social justice. Through their work together with and for their communities, they created a new framework – the reproductive justice framework – to shape a better and more effective public conversation about women's reproductive health and lives that includes abortion but encompasses so much more.

RJ focuses on four principles:

- 1) the right not to have a child
- 2) the right to have a child
- 3) the right to parent in safe and healthy environments
- 4) the right to sexual pleasure

And that so much more is exactly where churches need to stake our claim.

Reproductive Justice offers a better way to talk about reproductive health and decision-making. As a framework for public discourse, RJ recognizes both that abortion is a serious moral question and that women are capable of making serious moral decisions about their bodies and their lives. The moral norm that we should trust women is hardly a radical norm, it only *feels* radical in a world where we don't trust or respect the decisions that women make about having or not having children.

Seventeen congregations have signed on to become RJ congregations and 100 communities of faith across Texas are now talking about what it means to support Reproductive Justice and to

actively work in the world to support women and men as they make important moral decisions about their reproductive health and the future of their families.

Let's get 100 congregations across California talking about Reproductive Justice and let's mobilize and equip people of faith to speak out publicly in support of trusting women to make the reproductive health decisions that shape their future.

In a country where conservative voices seek to convince the public that God and Christianity are against abortion, now is the time for Christians to speak up for reproductive justice.