

Sermon November 7 2021 Molli Mitchell

SCRIPTURE: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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

SERMON: "Marking Time: Rituals for Renewal in a Fast-Paced Era" Molli Mitchell

In the traditional song of The Byrds, I believe that the next words are "I swear it's not too late."

I invite you to take a full belly breath with me. And one more.

My first three tattoos were three separate tiny dots. There were three tiny dots on my ribcage to line me up for the perfect dose of radiation. It was the last phase of my treatment for breast cancer. The treatments weren't really bad at first. I could go in the morning on my way to work.

Each day I would make a little routine for myself. I would have a playlist queued up. Sometimes I would just turn the radio on in the car to see what was playing. Sometimes it would be something to amp me up, something like the U2's "It's a beautiful day." And I would think about the sun coming up. It was January, so it was still kind of dark in the mornings sometimes. But as I was getting on the road, the sun would be coming up. Sometimes it would be really gray, but it would get brighter as I got to the hospital. Sometimes it would be a classic like The Byrds, reminding myself that this was only a season. For everything there's a season. Sometimes it would be something slower, a hymn or a praise song that would remind me that God was with me, my refuge and my strength. Lyrics that would remind me sometimes just how lucky I was to even have health insurance coverage.

I'd be in and out, no more than 40 minutes later, ready to take on the day, whatever strange things awaited me at my job at a small non-profit. Whatever I needed to do to ensure the young people in my program were on their way to success. Over the weeks, though, it got harder and harder to sing along with those songs. It got harder and harder to pop back off the table and get ready to go. I needed something new to remind me.

Have you ever found yourselves there? Some of the endless stretches of pandemic days that seemed to go by super quickly, or sometimes you would find yourself still struggling to get out of bed? Sometimes I get a little bowled over by all the things that are happening.

In my sixth and final week of radiation doses, I only really made it through a couple of half work days before I had to go home. I had to rest. Blisters were forming, and my skin was burned, and exhaustion had really set in. I knew I just needed to make it through the week. I was almost there. A lot was on the line then. But for me, the end was in sight. While it felt painful, there was a clear time that it would subside, a clear structure to the way that my days would go for just a little while longer. I only needed to hold on. To hold on just a little while longer. You know that hymn, "Hold on just a little while longer, hold on just a little while longer. Hold on." We hold on when we know we just need a little while longer.

Last week was Reformation Sunday -- Halloween and Reformation Sunday. We grappled with the legacy both good and not so great of a person who couldn't just hold on a little while longer. The situation in his beloved Catholic church, Martin Luther felt, was untenable. And out of love for that church, he wrote up some cogent arguments. He sought measures of reformation, to tweak it a little, to figure out how can we keep going together, something needs to change. So much was changing so quickly in his time. The printing press made a really big difference in knowing what those theses were, what his arguments were.

But he probably wasn't the only one frustrated, upset, locked out. So we venerate that particular man for writing out his arguments, surely. But it's plausible that there were so many others struggling with the way that the church happened to hold power, the types of religious laws that showed up in their lives. So I invite you to imagine with me back then many people who had been exiled, excommunicated. Family members unable to walk in the doors to receive the communion that matters so much for them and for us. Due to those infractions, they might have been righteously upset.

So I now invite you in your imaginations in this present moment in 2021. And here we are in this pandemic, a moment of extraordinary political polarization. It's frazzled our families, our social groups. There's unacceptable and unspeakable racial injustices still happening, that continue to be shrugged at, continue to not have a plan to redress. Our climate has changed to a point beyond recovery at this moment. The only plans for that are demonstrably not enough, and we know that. So what do you do? What do we do in times like this, when we can't just hold on a little while longer? When there are some righteously upset people. I'm sure you know some of them. Some of us are them.

One practice of marking time in this interminable length of pandemic moment has been to show up, to participate in outdoor activities. Sometimes those are public rallies, and sometimes those are a walk through a park. Sometimes I sit on the shoreline in New Haven and watch the birds. I bring my body to show up, where it is but one in a number of people willing to say "Here am I, Lord, send me." I bring my body to show up where my eyes and ears can witness to the testimony of those preaching, those singing. Those birds might be singing their songs, those crickets might be whistling a little differently these days.

Some of the righteous upset that I witness is from younger generations who are raging at what seems to be impossible systems to change. And you know those feelings. We all know those feelings. They're perennial. And we hear them come up again and again in our songs, in our poetry, in our theater productions, and in our artwork. Are our eyes attuned still, or have we gone a little bit numb? Much of our collective and individual upset stems from our fear that things won't be the same, or that things that are to come will be unbearable. We might go on a walk with our friends to talk about times when we felt like this before, or times our ancestors have felt like this before.

Psalm 46 enumerates all of the ways that people, in fear or in doubt, can look toward God. Can simply be still and know that God is with us. It can feel like a dubious claim, and I don't fault you for wondering sometimes where God is in all this, when so much seems to be on the line.

Our Scripture writer today, channeling the wisdom of ancient practices, turns our attention to the cycles present in our lives. But not every moment is a time for, say, embracing. "A time to build up, a time to break down; a time to dance, and a time to mourn." My morning rituals lately have had to center on lighting candles. I haven't been able to go to a funeral. I haven't been able to show up with other people who are sad, who are grieving, in the same ways that we used to. So I focus on lighting candles. I won't give you a liturgy to practice. But as you light candles this season – we just turned our clocks back, it's gonna get darker, I know you're going to want to light some candles this evening and as all the evenings get darker – I invite you to simply say, at the strike of your match or at the click of your lighter: "I light this candle for." And fill in who or what it is that you want to remember, that you want to bring forth in this moment. It could just be a memory.

As I light candles, I write and recall the stories of the folks who needed to keep their lamps lit, waiting for something to happen, those whose oil didn't run out when it seemed really bleak. It seemed like there wasn't going to be enough oil, it seemed like there wasn't going to be enough light. But there was. So I light a candle for my mentee who passed away last year, and in the memory of his poetry, it seems like it won't live on without him. But it might.

In this moment here in 2021, I wonder what is on the line for us. What are we yearning for that has yet to break into our daily practices? Is there anything that feels surely untenable in this moment? What measures of reformation might we put forward? Whose voices have already been elevating them?

At the end of my cancer treatments, for my very next birthday, I decided to get another tattoo, this time one of my own choosing, that marked the time that all in my body had to process. It's a ritual that I now proceed with at every major turn of my life, marking the time with a meaningful symbol, something that means something to me and to those I shared that time with. So now I have three more tattoos since that time, each imbued with meaning: my community of women that enabled my survival through what would have been an impossible time; my pod through the pandemic, feeding one another, nurturing one another in a time when surely if I was all alone I never would have made it.

Psalm 46 calls us back into the legacies of strength, the courage and wisdom of God. It says “Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” They are mighty words to describe terrifying and uncertain events in the history of our planet. We read, recite and pray the Psalms regularly. Not just regular Scriptures, but these psalms, to remember that we’re not the only ones who have been upset or joyous or afraid and unsure. This practice, a praying of the psalms and poems of the ancestors who went before us, aligns our memories. It gives us a little bit of fortitude. We participate here in these Sunday spaces – online, in person – we sing songs, we gather with one another to remember all that we’ve been through, and that we’re not alone. We remind ourselves that, though death is a mighty and inevitable power, we believe in something beyond it. We are a resurrection people. Amen?

Radiation is a medical procedure that kills cancer cells, and their death is somewhat necessary for the life of the whole body to go on. On Reformation Sunday and in the wake of it, I wonder what needs to die so that the life of our whole body can go on? Perhaps there are elements of our lives that have been shattered irreparably, and perhaps there are ways that we too have felt like we couldn’t go on. Here in the United Church of Christ as a Congregational church, we don’t need to write up theses and tack them to the door. We have the power. We are the Church.

For a lot is on the line here in this season. So may we remember what got us through before, and what’s getting us through now: music, daily rituals, rest, small prayers, lighting of candles, and even tattoos.

Friends, we belong to one another. May we remember all of these rituals to renew our spirits in these uncertain times. Amen.

Our guest pastor: Molli Mitchell is in her final year at Yale Divinity School where she is pursuing her MDiv on a path toward ordination in the United Church of Christ. Prior to discerning her call, she called Portland, Oregon home for over a decade where she worked both within and outside of nonprofits to build power with individuals and groups, prioritizing relationship-building and liberation. That work led her to her current research interests which lie in the deep questions of what repentance and reckoning look like in predominantly white institutions and how to facilitate those processes with solidarity and strong spiritual grounding.

Molli holds a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies and a Master of Science in Social Work both from the University of Wisconsin - Madison. She currently serves as the Convener of the Student Steering Committee of Andover Newton at Yale, and as the Interim Associate Pastor at the United Congregational Church of Tolland in Tolland, CT. Molli lives in New Haven with her affectionate cat Noodle.