



To every thing
there is a season, and
time to every a
purpose
under the heaven.
Ecclesiastes 3:1

Turning Time

Sunday, January 5, 2025

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Old Testament Lesson, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

¹ To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

² A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which 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 cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁷ A time to rend, 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 of war, and a time of peace. (KJV)

Sermon, "Turning Time"

The day after Christmas Candice asked if I wanted to go see *A Complete Unknown* at the movie theater; showtime was just a couple hours away.

A Complete Unknown captures the story of Bob Dylan from the beginning of his career as a folk artist up to 1965 when he transitioned into a rock artist. That transition was marked with the release of two albums, *Bringin' It All Back Home* in April, 1965, and *Highway 61 Revisited* in August of that same year.

Playing a prominent role in *A Complete Unknown* is folk singer Pete Seeger, played by Ed Norton. Seeger played a key role in helping Dylan break into the folk music scene by bringing him onstage and helping him get his first recording contract.

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As I watched the movie, I was transported back to my early teen years in Milwaukee when I was a newspaper carrier for the *Milwaukee Journal*. Many of my friends were other newspaper carriers, and several of us were heavy into the folk music of Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger. And I remembered going to see Pete Seeger in concert with some of my friends. I don't think I was more than 14 years old. But I remembered sitting in the plush, red folding seats of Milwaukee's Performing Arts Center—the PAC—when Pete Seeger came to town. And it was a simple concert by today's standards: no projection screen or light show or smoke. Just the singers, their acoustic instruments, and some sound amplification. I hadn't thought about that concert in a long, long time.

Folk music plays an important role in *A Complete Unknown*. But not just any folk music; much of the folk music of the day called for peace and justice and racial equality, all of which was considered un-American. In 1955, Pete Seeger appeared before the congressional House Un-American Activities Committee because they suspected him of being a communist. They didn't like the lyrics of his anti-war songs like "Crow on the Cradle" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

Pete Seeger also wrote, "Turn, Turn, Turn," which was later famously covered by The Byrds. Except for the title and the last two lines, the lyrics are taken almost verbatim from the King James Version of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, although Seeger does rearrange the sequence of the words to fit the meter of the song.

Since "Turn, Turn, Turn" was a number one hit on Billboard, and since the words date back at least 23 centuries, "Turn, Turn, Turn," may be the oldest song ever to reach number one on Billboard.

The title, of course, is repeated frequently throughout the song. And I've always been puzzled as to what connection Pete Seeger saw between the three words *turn, turn, turn* and the poem of Ecclesiastes 3. However, there's a clue at the end of the song: for the second time in "Turn, Turn, Turn," Seeger sings, "A time for peace." The first time around, he sings, "A time for peace and a time for war," just like it states in Ecclesiastes 3:8. But on the second time around, Seeger sings, "A time for peace." And then, instead of singing, "And a time for war," like it says in Ecclesiastes, he sings, "I swear it's not too late."

Seeger's song, then, is a call to peace. That's the meaning of "turn, turn, turn." Seeger is urging the country to turn away from war-making and turn toward peace-making.

No doubt Seeger knew a thing or two about war; he was an Army Veteran, serving our country as an Entertainment Specialist from 1942-1945, which, of course, was during World War II.

But where did he get that idea of turning? The answer is not "blowin' in the wind." The answer seems to be in how Pete Seeger chose to read the scriptures.

Ecclesiastes 3 presents fourteen couplets as *descriptions* of life experiences. But Seeger saw that the exhortation to choose was lacking, so he chose to read many of the couplets as *exhortations* to choose the preferable of the two.

That means we have a choice as well, even today. Is it a time to kill? or a time to heal? Choose healing. Or, in the words of Pete Seeger, turn away from killing and turn toward healing.

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Is it a time to cast away stones? Or a time to gather stones together? The allusion to casting stones may refer to the deliberate ruining of an enemy's fields by casting stones on them. In contrast, the gathering of stones may refer to the act of making peace with one's enemy by gathering the very stones you once cast in anger in order to ruin his field.

By the way. I grew up in Wisconsin, which, during the Ice Age, was entirely covered by glaciers. And as those glaciers retreated north to Canada, they left behind millions of rocks in fields all across Wisconsin.

Years ago, I heard a true story about a farmer and his son. One day in early spring, the farmer took his son out into a field to gather stones. It was hard, physical work, and the farmer noticed his young son wasn't carrying his weight; he only picked up small stones—rocks that were too small to bother with. So the farmer told his son not to mess with such little stones.

But the son replied, "I'm picking up the baby stones before they grow up to become bigger stones."

He's absolutely right: sometimes the little stones we cast in anger grow up to be giant boulders of hatred. So by adding, "turn, turn, turn," Pete Seeger exhorts us to turn away from feuding with your neighbor and instead gather stones for your neighbor as an act of reconciliation.

Is this a time to break down? Or a time to build up? The answer, it would seem, is to **turn away from breaking down and turn toward building up.**

There was an example of this in Thursday's *Upper Room*. In her devotional, "Honest Anger," Lauren Walker describes how she has turned away from anger toward her mother and turning toward a new path of trusting in God, especially during times of sorrow and suffering.

Are you making New Year's resolutions? Or are you turning away from old patterns of life and turning toward new intentions for your life?

These are good questions for the beginning of a New Year. Often at the beginning of a New Year, we talk about resolutions. If you've had your television on over the past week, you've probably seen ads for Planet Fitness or Weight Watchers or any number of other health and fitness companies. It's a big time of year for them because of New Year's *resolutions*.

But there's a problem with making resolutions, and that is once you make a resolution, you are setting yourself up for failure. Why? Because the next thing we talk about after making resolutions is breaking resolutions. And once we break a resolution, we've rendered it null and void. *Might as well forget that resolution; it's no longer any good. I've already broken it.*

How many of you made a resolution last Wednesday and you've already broken it?

The problem is that resolutions are task oriented. And if you don't perform the task, you end up feeling like a failure.

On the other hand, if you read Ecclesiastes as a series of exhortations, then the preacher of Ecclesiastes is calling you to follow a path of planting and building and embracing and mending. It's a path of practical intentions rather than resolutions.

And that's consistent with the teaching of Jesus, because Christ did not call people to a series of tasks; Jesus called people to walk a new path. Jesus called people to follow him. He called them to turn away from killing and weeping and mourning and scattering and giving up and tearing and silence and war. And instead, he called them to turn toward healing and

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laughing and dancing and gathering and searching and embracing and speaking out and mending and peace. And he still calls you and me to follow in those paths of righteousness.

So as we stand on the beginning of a New Year, I'm not going to ask you to make a resolution; rather, I'm going to ask you to set a direction for your life; maybe it's a new direction. It's "turning time." So this may involve turning away from the path you were on and turning onto a better path. I don't want to break down in 2025; I want to build up. Don't you? And I don't want to tear things up in 2025; I want to mend. I don't want to cast stones in 2025; I want to gather stones. So let's see how we might follow Jesus on a path of building up and mending and gathering stones and making peace for his sake—and for ours.