

THIS, TOO, SHALL PASS

Let's begin with a bit of Buddhism this morning, shall we?

When the Buddha, after all his trials, was finally enlightened, he saw the essence of reality with perfect clarity. What he came to understand in this flash of insight was later formulated into what are called the "Four Noble Truths." If one grasps these four fundamental principles, Buddhists believe, and if one perfectly applies them as guides for daily living, one's life will be devoid of suffering.

While each of these basic truths is worth some consideration, it is the first of the four which captures our attention on this occasion, because it sounds very much like what is stated in our reading from Ecclesiastes.

With his spiritual eye opened, the Buddha's first realization is this: All is transitory. The First Noble Truth is that everything in existence is transient, fleeting, temporary; nothing is permanent, lasting, or unchanging.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it, "For everything there is a season." Seasons come, and seasons go. Wisdom is the recognition that, while there is "a time for every matter under heaven," no one season lasts forever.

Whether Buddhist or Judaeo-Christian, this truth, it seems, is a universally-apparent one. Whatever aspect of human experience that we might offer as a case-in-point, the fact is, to put this insight into different words with which we are familiar, "this, too, shall pass."

"This, too, shall pass." Now that I'm a lot older, and so much wiser, than I was when I first heard my grandmother recite that little saying, I understand that there is a certain truth there which would benefit us if it were consciously incorporated into our day-to-day thinking. Over the course of our lives, no doubt, we shall have many occasions where it could be good to replay this saying back to ourselves, since it would benefit us in at least one of two ways.

The first of these, and the more obvious application of this simple-sounding rule, is in terms of our moments of trial and pain and struggle.

Since we hope that life for us will be a bed of roses--without any of the thorns, of course --our moments of unpleasantness are typically unbearable for us. "Oh, when will this ever be over?", we groan. "Surely, this stress and turmoil will never end!"

Over my years of ministry, having sat with my share of sufferers, legitimate and neurotic, it is my hunch that we do ourselves serious harm in hysterically figuring that such bad times will go on and on without break, without end. With such an exaggerated, even catastrophic, focus, we likely only intensify the suffering that is our lot at the moment. And, in dwelling on it in such a persistent manner, we also most likely prolong our unhappy experience of it.

At such times, it can be quite helpful to remind ourselves that "this, too, shall pass." That's what my grandmother was talking about. Certainly there is comfort in that; there is hope in that. The truth is that the trial will one day end. One way or another, the pain will be resolved. The struggle will lessen and be brought to a conclusion. It must, for nothing--not even our worst crisis--is permanent.

For everything there is a season, Ecclesiastes says. There is a time for duress, and a time for relief. I said that it is in a twofold sense that this truth regarding the impermanence of things is to be appreciated.

The other, not-as-obvious but very important application of this little rule occurs, interestingly, in the opposite situations. Paradoxically, in these instances, the issue is not that things are going so poorly but that they're going so well.

In our times of distress and pain, the problem is that we assume the disagreeable will never cease; in our times of blessing and pleasure, the problem is that we assume the agreeable will last forever, and, uninspired, we find ourselves drowsily nodding off.

If we naively figure that things are going to continue to float along, nicely and smoothly, without fluctuation or ceasing, we quickly begin to settle in and take it all for granted, and we find ourselves snoozing through the best parts of life. How sad is that?! That leads us to behave as though there is no compelling reason to celebrate good health, be grateful for significant relationships, relish the present company of good friends, take advantage of current opportunities, or savor remarkable experiences underway, for, well, there's always next month or next year, right?

Wrong! For, as our fundamental piece of insight rightly observes, "this, too, shall pass"-- every single part of it, so it is of the essence that we acknowledge and appreciate it while we have it. I'm not sure at all that this was any part of my grandmother's thinking, but it follows from the former. Health fails and life itself can abruptly come to an end, key relationships are disrupted and broken all the time, even the best of friends move away, even the grandest opportunities gradually fade and close, and every mountaintop moment must some time come to an end.

They must, for we possess a life where the rule of impermanence is beyond dispute, and where not even the best human experience is abiding. So, while we still have it, we'd do well to be paying attention and to be throwing ourselves into it for all we're worth.

For everything there is a season, Ecclesiastes says. There is a time for fortunate and desired abundance, and a time for unfortunate, unwanted loss.

Surely, we could do worse than to remind ourselves, both in the worst of times and in the best of times that "this, too, shall pass." This little rule can be the means by which we console and fortify ourselves in the valleys in life that have to be endured, and by which we awaken ourselves to be fully engaged atop the mountains that are climbed. A well-grounded wisdom is found in persons who manage neither to bury themselves in anger or despair in the depressions, nor foolishly or smugly to fall asleep on the peaks.

It may remain a distressing concern that ultimately the human condition is to be forever caught between the ceaseless ebbs and flows of things, to be unendingly bandied about between experiencing the unavoidably alternating positive and negative, desirable and undesirable, moments in life.

As Christians, though, we are encouraged to discern, at the heart of all this fundamental impermanence, the Permanent One, the God who, as Ecclesiastes puts it, "endures forever" (3.14). Beyond the being blown about by the ever-shifting down's and up's of human existence, we are able to anchor ourselves in the Holy One, who, there at the center of all that which "shall pass," does not.

It's an important question: Do you know for yourself that One--the still point at the very center of all the swirling flux and change?

Or, unlike the Buddha, are you still on your way to that moment of personal breakthrough?

Better get to it, then, before this moment, too, shall pass!

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