

In Season and Out of Season
II Timothy 3:14-4:5; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 18:1-8

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Luke 18:1-8

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said,

“In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”

⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

II Timothy 3:14-4:5

¹⁴But as for you,
continue in what you have learned and firmly believed,
knowing from whom you learned it,
¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings
that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful
for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in
righteousness,
¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient,
equipped for every good work.

^{4:1}In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus,
who is to judge the living and the dead,
and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you:

²proclaim the message;
be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;
convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound
doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves
teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to
the truth and wander away to myths.

⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an
evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

The Sermon

Each human life is an intricate web, a beautiful and unique tapestry.

Every day, you are a compendium of experiences and ideas, memories, relationships, fears and hopes and questions, and emotional reactions to all of that and everything else we see and hear and feel.

With all of that going on at or just below the surface, it's important—and sometimes gets harder as it goes along—to remember that we have an anchor, a center of gravity, a singular truth, like the sun at the center of our solar system: that at all times and in all seasons, God is always God; and we are always God's people; and no matter your circumstances, you always belong to God, in every season and for all time.

His name was Francois Rabelais. His life span was the first half of the 16th century. He was a progenitor of the literary form you and I now call the novel. He was for some time a Franciscan, and then a Benedictine, monastic. In his adult lifetime—most of which he seems to have spent hiding under the protection of a succession of wealthy or noble benefactors from church authorities who disapproved of his writing—he was also a physician, an editor, a Greek scholar; a humorist, satirist, pamphleteer, novelist; a judicial officer and, late in life, a member of the clergy serving two churches in the vicinity of Paris.ⁱ

Some of his writing is said to be sublime and enriching; some of it is said to be appalling filth. I wouldn't know; I've never read it. My interest in him this morning lies in what, supposedly, were the “famous last words” of this in-every-sense Renaissance man of deep (if unorthodox) spiritual commitment, expertise in vastly different areas, and a lot of life lived in a comparatively short time.

The sourcing is hard to track down, but as Rabelais knew he was nearing the end of one part of his journey, his purported last words were:

“I go now to seek a great Perhaps.”ⁱⁱ

Maybe his reputation for saying things like that was part of the reason some of his contemporaries called him an atheist. They were wrong: he didn't renounce God, and he was actively serving the church right up until he retired just weeks before he died in 1554.

And anyway, Christians these days are *accustomed* to standing in awe before the Holy Mystery that is our Creator God. The Great Perhaps is not some simplistic question of whether God is there or not.

It's about amazement, and wonder, and the fact that God constantly surprises us with old wisdom and new questions, and dreams and visions and revelations and friendships and relationships and collaborations that we never expected and could never have thought to put together on our own.

And while part of our familiarity with the quest for "Great Perhapses" is the recognition that it's just as much about *this* life as it is about what comes after, the New Testament letters to Timothy are a window into the thoughts of a servant of God, recognizing that he is living in the late autumn of his life, wanting to share what he has gleaned with a younger minister who is just waking up to the springtime of his.

I was a counselor at a youth event in Charlotte Presbytery 20-some years ago when the question was asked of all of us: what message do you, personally, most want to pass on to the people who come after you?

I was reminded of that the other day when, at our denomination's request, I was filling out some answers to what was kind of a ho-hum survey of ministers, and all of a sudden came to this one: "If you had the ability to talk with your younger self, what would you tell your younger self about ministry?"

I thought: I've got a great deal I want to say to that knucklehead.

But then they helpfully added the line: “We fully understand that this is not possible”—well, shoot—“but what you say may be helpful to those who are just entering ministry.”

Remembering that every single one of us, not just clergy, is a “minister:” if you could talk with your younger self, what would you tell your younger self about being a disciple—beyond what you believe in the privacy of your inner thoughts, or your personal walk with Jesus, but in terms of *what it means to minister to this world*, in your life—

what would you say to Younger You about ministry, particularly if what you had to say could be helpful to someone right now who was just beginning the journey as a new disciple—a first-time church member, or someone who’s just now growing into a personal sense of God’s call on their life, just about to step into their own search for whatever Great Perhapses are waiting for them?

Thomas Oden has said of this point in the Second Letter to Timothy, “Timothy’s race remains yet ahead, even as Paul’s is completing... [This] is the last passing of the baton—not only Paul’s last opportunity to instruct and charge Timothy but the historic Christian community as a whole.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And here in these closing words, Oden says, Paul is instructing Timothy, and by extension the whole Church, and by extension us, and by extension those who will come after us: what we are called to do happens “in season and out of season.”^{iv}

The Great Perhaps is always before us, always part of the life God has given each of us, “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable” (II Tim 4:2).

Our sense of God’s presence has seasons of ebb and flow.

Sometimes, everything clicks, and the people around you are all, in one way or another—whether they even realize it or not—helping you on your journey; and sometimes, even when the external circumstances are rotten, you can feel the hope and strength and comfort of God’s word binding people together and bringing renewed purpose and confidence into even the most dismal and dire circumstances.

Sometimes it just feels like the circumstances for recognizing God at work and sharing the good news are just right.

And then there are the times, as James Cone said, when “Suffering... gives rise to doubt.” And before you can come around to reclaiming the confidence that “doubt does not have the final word, [but] the final word is faith giving rise to hope,” you have to wander in the desert for a while, tired and thirsty, wondering: “How can one believe in God in the face of such horrendous suffering as slavery, segregation, and the lynching tree?”^v

Sometimes you feel like Hank Williams singing, “I’m so lonesome I could cry.”

Sometimes, as Anne Lamott has said, you can “feel like a tired, wired little kid at a birthday party who has had way too much sugar, who is in all ways on overload, but still finds herself blindfolded and spun around for a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, and then pushed more or less in the direction of the wall with the donkey on it.” But you’re “so turned around, so lost and overwhelmed and stressed that [you can’t] even remember where the wall with the donkey was—or even in what direction it might be found. So [you can’t] take one step forward without there being a chance that [you’re] actually walking farther away from it.”^{vi}

“It took me a while,” she said, “to remember that for me, the wall with the donkey on it is Jesus.”^{vii}

But we are reminded by the Bible, and each other's testimony, and by experiences that settle us into beauty or rock us to our foundations, that at all times and in all seasons,

God is always God, and we are always God's people, and you always belong to God, in every season and for all time.

According to Luke, Jesus taught his followers about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people, and in that city was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while the judge refused to do anything about it, but later, he thought: 'Even though I have no fear of God and no respect for anybody, because this widow keeps on bothering me, I'll grant her justice, just to get her to stop coming around all the time asking for justice.'"

Clearly the judge is not being what a judge is supposed to be. If he was Jewish,^{viii} and he "neither feared God nor had respect for people," he was, for starters, in violation of all Ten Commandments, and for that matter he's in violation of Deuteronomy's instructions on justice for widows.^{ix} And even if he's not one of the Covenant People, he's still kind of a creep.

Interestingly to me, the widow isn't exactly being what she's supposed to be either, at least, according to the norms of a world in which she was never supposed to have the voice God gave her. She's supposed to be "marginalized," without an adult male to speak on her behalf outside the house.^x

She's not having any of that. She speaks like a trained lawyer. The Greek words Luke uses have Jesus saying that she was using serious legal terms that could just as well be translated that she's telling the judge to "secure her rights," to "mete out the appropriate sentence" against her "plaintiff" or the "defendant."^{xi}

So Jesus paints a picture of a judge who isn't really being a judge, and a widow who isn't consigning herself to the proscribed position of a widow. In the face of justice denied, she has stepped out of the stunted role her society had in mind for her, and into a Great Perhaps.

In the words of the scholar Miguel De La Torre, she “occupies the liminal space [the threshold, the intermediate zone] between the crucifixion of Friday and the resurrection of Sunday.”

He says, “To live in the space of Holy Saturday with the widow pestering that justice be done is to embrace the hopelessness of the moment.”

But he clarifies: “To be hopeless is not to give in to fatalism. We are called to seek justice, not because it is easy or because in the end we will win; we are called to seek justice, regardless of the consequences, for the sake of justice.”^{xii}

That's the space where faithful people learn to live.

Whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; in season and out of season; whether we're in the autumn of our life, or just waking up to our springtime; at times when there is a hunger and thirst for the Word of God, *and* when testifying to what you know doesn't seem like it has a hope of getting anywhere with anybody;

We pray always, and we don't lose heart, because God is always our God; and we are always God's people; and you and I always belong to God.

And when we have finally lived all the earthly days that God has appointed for us, we will find that our “Perhaps” is God's eternal clarity; that our famous last words are only the passing of a baton; and that what felt like ebb and flow was in fact a constant, never ending stream of

love, love, love, from God to the world God made, with you as God's specifically chosen messenger of the Good News of great joy that is never, ever out of season.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
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ⁱ General biographical information about Rabelais is widely available online; I've only included here statements that are attributed to more than one source.

ⁱⁱ John Green's novel *Looking for Alaska* features a protagonist who is obsessed with the last words of famous people, and this Rabelais quote plays a key part in the plot. With *Looking for Alaska* now premiering as a series on Hulu, this quote may gain currency in the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Interpretation commentary; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 134-35

^{iv} Oden, *First and Second Timothy*, 136

^v James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 106-107

^{vi} Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 149

^{vii} Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 149

^{viii} Gregory Allen Robbins considers similar "Jewish or Gentile" observations in Robbins, "Luke 18:1-8 Exegetical Perspective" in Cynthia Jarvis & Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 131

^{ix} Robbins specifically cites these: Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; etc.

^x Miguel A. De La Torre, "Luke 18:1-8 Theological Perspective" in Cynthia Jarvis & Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 128

^{xi} Robbins, "Exegetical Perspective," 131.

^{xii} De La Torre, "Theological Perspective," 132