

A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance
A meditation for the memorial service for Mark Anthony Gallaher

Today we are filled with contradictions. We are less than a week away from the joyous celebration of Christmas, in a sanctuary adorned for this festive season, yet we are here on the occasion of the untimely death of a beloved husband, father, friend and colleague. We are here at the family's invitation to celebrate the vibrant spirit of Mark Gallaher. But we are also here to share our grief, and especially to share in the grief of Mark's family. We are here to worship God and to hear God's word for this day and this difficult time of our lives. But many of you here may have trouble hearing that word, even if it is a word you need – and want to hear. Those of us who saw Mark and walked with Mark in his final days are here with some sense of thanksgiving that for Mark, the sufferings he endured have ended. Others of you may regret not having seen Mark at the end, and may want to only remember him as he was not so long ago. Contradictions abound.

Overlaying all of this is the naked reality that a man we don't think of as being old enough to die has indeed died. What do we make of all of this?

I would draw us to two texts, one ancient, one contemporary, one from the Bible and one from the street, to give us some perspective – and something to hold on to.

“For everything there is a season.” So the author of Ecclesiastes begins one of the best known and most often quoted passage of scripture. Ecclesiastes writes of the seasons of life: birth and death, war and peace, grief and joy, breaking down and building up, mourning and dancing. For everything there is a season. As creation's seasons turn from summer to fall, fall to winter, winter to spring and spring back to summer again, so also our lives are ever changing, ever turning, ever moving from one emotion to another, from one experience to another, from celebration to tragedy and failure to success. Everything in life is ever changing. The only thing that remains the same, the only constancy in our lives, is God and God's word. Humanity comes and goes, human projects rise and fall, but what God does endures forever.

Because life is ever changing, and so unpredictable, Ecclesiastes suggests the thing to do is to live your life to the fullest. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. The joys of today can easily turn into sorrows tomorrow. Life is a gift of God, so take that gift and enjoy it.

For everything there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die, 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. Consider these contemporary words on the time to dance.

Looking back on the memory of the dance we shared beneath the stars above
For a moment all the world was right
How could I have known you'd ever say goodbye
And now I'm glad I didn't know the way it all would end the way it all would go
Our lives are better left to chance
I could have missed the pain but I'd of had to miss the dance

I am not suggesting that Garth Brooks is a theologian or conversant with the perspective on life we find in Ecclesiastes. But like Ecclesiastes, these lyrics remind us life is ever changing and unpredictable. Brooks suggests, because we only have one chance at life, we have to take some chances, make some leaps of faith, if we would live life to the fullest. For it is in those faith leaps that we leap to greater depth and higher joys.

(OVER)

And if you would enjoy life to the fullest, you also must be prepared to experience the pain as well. Garth Brooks puts it this way: *I could have missed the pain but I'd of had to miss the dance.* CS Lewis, the 20th century theologian and author of the *Narnia Chronicles* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* expressed it this way: "Why love, if losing hurts so much? I have no answers anymore: only the life I have lived. The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal."

Mark's death is a reminder to all of us that when you dare to love, you also accept the possibility – and the inevitability – of loss. For the sake of the joy and fulfillment that love brings us, we accept and endure the pain that accompanies love.

What then is God's word for us this day?

For everything there is a season. The turning of the seasons for creation and the turning of the seasons of our lives remind us of the emptiness of life apart from God. The weeping and the laughing, the mourning and the dancing - all of it is the same, and none of it amounts to very much - in the face of what GOD DOES.

And what does God do? God comforts us in our sorrows. God rejoices with us in our laughter. God supports us in our weakness. God seeks us out when we are lost. God rejoices when we are found, and God welcomes us home with a warm embrace when we run away.

God is with us in all of the seasons of life. God is with us in the joys and the successes and the mountaintops and God walks with us in the valley of the shadow of death. God's presence in our lives puts everything else in perspective. And what God does, endures forever.

The late theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "**The darkness into which the light of Christmas shines is above all the darkness of death.**" The light of Christmas is the powerful light of the conquest of the power of death. If Christmas has any meaning, Tillich suggests, it is that in Jesus Christ the God taking part in human flesh and blood destroys the source of our fears and liberates us so that we might live in faith and with hope. ("The destruction of death", in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 169)

Into the darkness of this day, the brilliant light of the Christ who has come shines over us, illuminating our path. For the one who came and lived and taught and died, has been raised for US. And because Christ HAS COME, WE can go on. Because Christ has come, we will go on.

Dear friends: Place all of your burdens on the shoulders of the God who would lift you up like a loving father. Receive the comforting presence of God's Spirit. Embrace the God who is ready and eager to be with you in all of the seasons of your life. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.

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Richmond, Virginia
December 19, 2009