

Squamish United Church  
Rev. Karen Millard  
Busy: Restoring Connection to an Unhurried God

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Scripture: Scripture Ecclesiasties 3: 1-13

### **Part 5: The Rhythm of Life**

One of the things I love about living here on the west coast of Canada is that we get every season of the year. I also love that for the most part we don't get it too harshly - just mild weather changes that for a few weeks of every seasonal change we struggle with which layers to put on. In many parts of the world there are not such distinct seasons but for me we are given opportunity to equate the changing seasons with the seasons of life. We know that there is a resting period for the plants and flowers in the winter and while they look tired above the earth underground they are in the midst of creating magical bursts of abundant beauty that burst forth in the spring. We understand that the rain nourishes the soil and the plants so that in the warmth of the summer they will flourish and hopefully we will have enough water to maintain life for the season. Many of us have come to love the images of autumn, bright colours of leaves that fall at the end of life preparing for a sabbath rest until next spring.

Its beautiful and rich and it can sooth our soles in the journey of life if we let it. Creation is an ever-changing, ever-constant reflection of a living, creative God who uses it for his purposes. And it is magnificent in scale. As Thomas Aquinas once said, "All the efforts of man cannot exhaust the essence of a single fly."

Yet in our post-industrial societies, humans are growing increasingly distant from the wonder and power of creation. Climate is controlled by a thermostat. Our windows rarely open. We need not notice weather, the seasons, and other cycles of creation unless we want to. Our food is delivered without any dirt getting under our fingernails, from places we know not where, in seasons of harvest we know not when. We barely notice when trees bud or creeks rise.

It's kind of strange, isn't it, how our globalized economy has eliminated so much seasonality from our supermarkets? We can walk the produce aisle and find beans and tomatoes all year long. And while I love the fact that I can pick up a pint of blueberries in January instead of waiting until late summer, I've grown increasingly wary of the cost of all this a-seasonality. I'd like to say I am religious about not picking up strawberries out of season but the reality is my kids love strawberries and they see them in the isle and depending on the price they just might get them because... well its better than a bag of chips.

And yet at times when I really think it through, It's not so much the monetary cost that I'm worried about, but the toll it takes on the environment. It takes a lot of gasoline to haul or fly blueberries clear from Mexico in order to enjoy them in the dead of winter. More of the world's energy resources get expended and more carbon is released into the atmosphere. Eliminating winter blueberries from the produce aisle won't do much to fix this problem, but I wonder if we

should be eliminating more of our sense of entitlement to have anything we want whenever we want it—and not just with food.

The book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that seasonality is a foundational component of life. “For everything there is a season.” If we eliminate a sense of seasonality from our lives, might we also be cutting out something foundational about our experience of life itself? According to Ecclesiastes, seasonality is not simply limited to the literal seasons of the year. There is a “time for every matter under heaven.”

I struggle with this at times, I mean honestly shouldn't healing be a forever season and could we please illuminate the season of killing. We should always be building up and never tearing down. When shouldn't we laugh and dance? Wouldn't it be lovely if life could always be joy-filled. I know our culture aims for this but I wonder how our experience of life would change if we set down our fantasies of finding some sort of permanent state of bliss and embraced its actual rhythm and flows of life.

Natural rhythms guide all that we do – our very existence. Our breath and heartbeat are constant reminders of life's pulsing rhythm that moves within and around us.

Our lives are orchestrated or guided by the rising and setting of the sun and the moon, the changes in temperature from day to night and from season to season, the tidal ebb and flow, and by our own internal rhythm. These rhythms guide our daily activity.

Not only are there external rhythms and cycles, there are also rhythms and cycles in our own lives. Women, more than men are affected by the daily and monthly cycles that guide our energy, moods and sleep. When our rhythms are in sync, life flows easily – we have more energy and tend to view things more positively, and we are more socially connected and find life more satisfying.

Embracing the seasonality of life has other benefits besides helping us deal productively with the tough times. When you embrace life's flow, you leverage the energy of that flow. You can use it to your advantage. If you grow tomatoes in season, you can easily reap a bumper crop. If you grow them in January (and not in a hot house), you can try all you like but reap only snowballs, not tomatoes.

When we don't take time to connect intentionally to the seasons we lose a dimension of the grandeur and glory of God. We lose a sense of the sublime that we experience standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or intentionally exposing ourselves to the brutality of a winter storm. We lose a sense of wonder when we aren't planting flowers, harvesting food in our garden, or watching a bird build a nest. We miss opportunities for gratitude and worship when we don't take time to pause before the simplicity of a tree, taking in its bark, leaves, shape, form—and realizing this little piece of nature is perfectly achieving the purpose God set for it. John Calvin said, “There is not one blade of grass, there is no colour in the world, that is not intended to make

us rejoice.” But when we are far from the grass and colours of the world, we miss opportunities to rejoice.

We also miss a sense of healthy proportion and orientation. Exposure to creation reveals that we are small and God is big. It humbles us and reminds us of who we are in relation to a holy God. But technologies like smartphones have distorted our sense of proportion by placing us firmly in the centre of a universe wholly within our digital grasp. They situate us as consumers who need not bother going outside because the world is infinitely accessible, supposedly, on the device in our pocket. Our digital environments sever us not only from one another, but also from God’s beautiful creation.

Many people move or stay in Squamish for the long term because of the creation that surrounds us, because of its beauty and its seasons. And yet, as I have been working through this series I have been challenged by how much we miss out even in our appreciation of it all. In the very first day of this series when I sat with a few people at our pre-lenten retreat I realized something I had been missing. So many of us are hikers, and bikers and boaters and we enjoy the natural environment and yet I can be so guilty of taking time in nature just to get what I need from it. I go for a run or a walk to get exercise, go out to paddle to get a strenuous work out. I can miss what it really around me and I rush through it. Thank goodness I can do it in that way (because like the person at the beginning of our worship service I just might go to the gym and keep working - I can’t do that on the boat). I think it is worth our consideration of what we are missing. I shared this little video with our group 5 weeks back now and I wanted to share it with you and challenge us all to go out and find some wholeness and healing this week. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stuZaKB9j7I>

Creation is not an end in itself, something to be worshiped and yet it points us to a good, gracious, powerful, extravagant, healing, loving creator. A world that disregards or distances itself from creation is a world that will naturally disregard and distance itself from God and from abundant living.

I read something that shocked me this week. Tom Occhipinti, environmental education coordinator of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, points out in a recent paper, children born in the last couple of decades have replaced formative experiences in the out-of-doors with text messaging, the iPod, etc. Did you know that the Oxford Junior Dictionary has removed words such as dandelion, heron, otter, acorn, clover and willow, while they have added words such as Blackberry, blog, mp3 player and broadband. The implications, according to Tom, are clear: "The very generation that will face the most difficult environmental issues will have the least exposure, understanding, and appreciation for the environment."

Richard Louv, in his groundbreaking book *Last Child In The Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, outlines the horrific consequences of this disconnect from the created world -- spiritually as well as emotionally and physically. There are ever-emerging consequences of this indoor-centered life: ADD, near-sightedness, obesity, hypertension, sleep disorders and

increased aggressiveness. The term "nature deficit disorder" has subsequently entered the mainstream. It describes the horrific consequences that derive from our increasing disconnect from nature. I'd like to think because we live here in Squamish that just won't be an issue for us but if I am honest I can see it happening with ease. We live such busy lives -most of us adults working way more than 40 hour work weeks connect with nature from time to time, but that used to be the main thing, now its the alternative.

All of this has got me wondering if we're actually not meant to live and work in perfect consistency day after day, week after week. What if like everything around us we're meant to thrive, rest and hibernate in seasons? I know it's just not possible, but I can't shake these thoughts. I constantly feel bombard with this notion that we should be laser focused on maintaining productivity and constantly growing in every way possible – income, social media following, weight loss , you name it. There's no time for rest. And yet “do you ever look at nature and feel a quiet reassurance that it's bigger than you, that your life is actually quite insignificant in the grand scheme of things and you're part of something wonderful? I know I do, perhaps I always have, I remember a time when I was a youth working and we were driving a group of youth from Surrey to West Edmonton mall and I was obviously pondering the beauty of the sunset and the landscape out loud because later one of the teen boys said to another male leader “Karen just wouldn't stop talking about how beautiful things are.” My colleague responded “I know - she does that.” I couldn't even remember saying anything so I guess its just in my DNA it might be a strange Karenism but I'm okay with it.

Observing nature and realizing the vastness of our world gives me a sense of relief. The changing seasons are healing for me and they remind me of the rhythms of life. Call me lazy if you must but this idea that we're consistently supposed to grow grow grow isn't just exhausting, I think it's unnatural too. Even rampant vines, like the wisteria taking over, only burst into bloom for a few weeks every year. Most of the time they're resting and preparing for the next big bloom when the time is right. A peony cannot bloom come May unless it's enjoyed plenty of rest since the last time it bloomed. The more I think about it the more I notice how varied my energy, focus and motivation is throughout the year. I've realized I'm naturally more productive in winter, where as in summer I prefer to be outside more and my focus on work naturally takes a backseat. Those long summer days seem to slow everything down. Autumn has that fresh new back to school feeling and I can guarantee my energies will rise again when it comes around. The more I think about the idea of seasonal living (and working) the more I see it literally *everywhere*.

Our life has a rhythm of its own and the stages of our life from babyhood, through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, parenthood, and aging, show us that we have a life cycle of which birth and death are a part. Arlene Ingraham and I were talking about this the other day. We have pushed the cycles of life under the carpet in many ways. Trying to ignore the natural rhythm of aging and even death and dying. We don't even know how to respond to each other anymore. In our culture when someone dies there is almost an ignorance. Quick have a service, get things done, move on with life. You know even when your parent dies and is over 100, your parent still died and a piece of you is still gone and there has to be a time to slow it down and cherish and grieve the moment.

Slowing down allows us to connect to the rhythms and cycles of life working with them instead of against them or in ignorance of them.

Many people live their lives cut off from the natural rhythms and cycles of nature and of their own bodies. They no longer get up with the sun, and they may stay up till the wee hours of the morning. Their pace of life is such that it is inconsequential whether it is night or day or winter or summer. The phases of the moon go unnoticed. Even the stages of their own life go unnoticed. This plays havoc on our bodyclocks. Our erratic stressful lives are in a state of arrhythmia. Arrhythmia is a term used to refer to the disorders of the regular beating of the heart, for example wild erratic beating, slow uneven beating.

For people with arrhythmia of life their bodies and lives are out of sync with the natural world and the natural rhythms that govern all life.

For many young people growing up today, they only know life arrhythmia. For them, this state of deviation from nature appears normal. They have not experienced living in tune with the natural rhythms. Traditionally all cultures have lived in harmony with the natural rhythms and cycles and have included celebrations, festivals and outdoor events to reinforce their occurrence. Most of these are now lost to our current consumeristic, success oriented lives. It might do us well to bring these traditions back by marking them with some celebration. For example, we could hold an organic dinner party for friends to mark the solstices and equinoxes. It is partly why even here at church we are encouraging the children to be a part of planting our flower garden. More than ever before our children and ourselves, need to be part of the slowing down and living in tune with the natural rhythms and cycles that have guided our evolution for the past 2 billion years. We need to connect to life. For everything there is a season. May we embrace it.

Amen.