

October 1, 2017 – 2 Timothy 4:1-4

This past spring, we had a combination birthday party/open house at our newly purchased home. And many of you came out to join us. At that point, we had only owned it for a couple of months and the whole place looked pretty bare and unfinished. But you knew that going in.

Since then we have worked hard on decorating and furnishing the interior. There's new rugs, new paint, new decorations, new appliances. The inside of the house has come a long way.

The outside? Not so much. To be blunt... it's a mess. The flower beds are filled with weeds. The bushes are overgrown. The deteriorating trim work on the house is untouched. It's really pretty embarrassing. My neighbors, with their perfectly landscaped front yards must think we are complete slobs.

Now, I could give all sorts of excuses for this situation, but when it comes right down to it, I've just been avoiding it. Because working outdoors in the summer is just too hot. I'm a sweaty, sweaty guy. And working outdoors is dirty enough as it is. I just don't like working in the heat.

So I've been waiting until Fall. Waiting until the heat breaks, like it has finally started to recently, to tackle some of these projects, in something other than 90° with 90% humidity. And, in a way, I'm kind of looking forward to seeing what I can get done. So that, just maybe, I'll be able to plant some flowers next spring.

Sometimes its best to just wait and do things “in season.” Farmers know that well, of course. You don't plant corn in the middle of winter. You don't harvest tomatoes in the middle of spring. These things have a season. They have to be planted at the right time. They have to be harvested at the right time. A lot of that harvesting is going on right now.

Of course, they were even more aware of this in the world that St Paul lived in. For them, it wasn't just about landscaping your home or harvesting your crops. Everything revolved around the seasons.

Did you know the Old Testament talks about springtime as the season for war? That's right. We think about spring as a time of love and growth and new life. But in the ancient world, springtime meant that they could finally launch the attack they had been planning all winter without fighting the cold at the same time as their fought their enemy.

The same was true of travel. The book of Acts records how when St Paul was being taken to Rome for trial, the captain of the ship he was on tried to sail during the late fall, when horrible thunderstorms were known to strike. And ended up getting them all shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

So their lives and our lives often revolve around doing things in season and avoiding things out of season. Looking at our environment and either saying, “This is a good time to do this project. The conditions are perfect.” Or saying, “No, no this a bad idea. We would be better off waiting and trying again later.”

In our Epistle lesson today, though, Paul says the exact opposite. And I imagine it was pretty surprising to Timothy. He writes, “*Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*”

Be ready in season and out of season. It's an interesting expression. What does it mean to preach the word in season? What does it mean to preach the word out of season? And why would we want to be ready to do both, when so often we avoid doing things out of season?

Well, Paul explains that in the next couple verses. He says, “*For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching.*” Now, just from that, we can make one important conclusion: right now, as Paul is writing this, the people are enduring sound teaching.

Timothy is a pastor, after all. A young pastor, for whom Paul has been a close mentor. And he's telling Timothy, “Look, you have it great right now. Your congregation is eating up what you are teaching them. They are sponges for your preaching. They love God's Word. That is awesome.”

That is, in fact, what it means to preach the Word “in season.” To use Jesus' parable, Timothy's congregation is good soil. That he is sowing the Word of God into and it is growing up into a one hundredfold harvest.

But it won't always be like that. *“The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”*

The time is coming for Timothy when it won't be easy. When his congregation won't eat up the things he teaches. When they will reject when he preaches. When they will not love God's Word. And when that happens, he will be preaching “out of season.”

The time is coming for Timothy when his congregation, in fact, will abandon him. They will run after false teachers who just tell them what they want to hear. Who will scratch the itch of temptation. Who will appeal to their sinful passions. Who will tell them myths and lies that have nothing to do with the Word of Truth found in Christ Jesus.

We know what that feels like. We're in a time like that right now in our country, I believe. I'm not saying St Paul was giving a prophecy of the United States in 2017. That's just the way it's always been for God's people.

Ancient Israel went through times of being in season and out of season. Listening to the prophets and murdering the prophets. And the Christian church has gone through periods of being in season and out of season. The Reformation itself was simply Martin Luther realizing that the Word was not being preaching and the people were not receiving sound teaching.

And today? Today we have a lot of false teachers who tell people exactly what they want to hear. Who tell people that the Gospel is all about health, wealth, and prosperity. Who tell people that God's Law is merely a suggestion, to be ignored at your own convenience. Who tell people that their good works will save them and then arrogantly judge those who don't meet their personal standard.

It is not always good soil out there. In fact, sometimes it is decidedly bad soil. A barren wasteland of people who couldn't be less receptive to God's Word.

And sometimes it doesn't feel like we're equipped to handle. Like the work is too hard. Or our talents not sufficient. Or our financial resources stretched too thin. It feels like the world is out of season. And it feels like our congregation is out of season.

Yet, we are called to preach in season and out of season. We preach when the crowds are flocking to us. And we preach when they're running away to thieves and liars. We preach when it's easy. And we preach when it's hard.

Because that's how Jesus preached. That's how Jesus lived. That's how Jesus died. One minute, he's healing the sick and raising the dead. The next he's being driven out of his own hometown. One minute he's entering Jerusalem to shouts of “hosanna”. The next he's being nailed to a cross.

And he knew it was coming. He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and he knelt down and he said, “Father, these people could not be more “out of season.” In a few hours, the Pharisees and chief priests will tell them exactly what their itching ears want to hear. They will appeal to their own most hateful passions, and they will shout, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” They will look at me, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and they will say, “What is truth?”

“Yet, I know that from my death, these same people will be saved. From this one moment that feels so very out of season, a new harvest will spring up to eternal life. So I will not wait until this is easy, but will do the hardest thing that has ever been done by any human being. Not my will, but yours be done.”

That's what it means to preach in season and out of season. It means doing work in the hottest summer heat when you'd rather wait until fall. Planting corn in the middle of winter when all your human wisdom says it would be better to wait until spring. Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that wants nothing to do with him.

Because, in the end, it is not your work and it is not your harvest. And just as God did the will of his Father out of love for us, we do the will of Jesus out of love for our neighbor. Because, as Paul says at the beginning of this passage, Christ Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead, and he is very soon going to appear in his kingdom.

And we don't have time to wait and do the work when it feels "in season." Not when Jesus' love and mercy comes to us in every season. That's the message that we proclaim from the housetops. That's the Word we preach with patience and teaching. That's the truth we speak. Until that day when Jesus comes again. Amen.