The author of Ecclesiastes, writing over 1000 years ago tells us: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”¹

Some of you may have heard these timeless words first as the lyrics to the 1965 chart topping song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” by The Byrds. I know at least the gray and bald heads among us know the still-catchy tune.

I can’t think about these words without the refrain going through my head. The tune makes me smile, yet the words are haunting. Seasons mean change, and “goodbye” is not an easy thing to say; even “hello” can be nerve-wracking at times. As much as we hate it, life includes many beginnings and endings. Dying, uprooting, tearing down, scattering, breaking up and moving on are very much a part of the world we live in—as are giving birth, planting, building, gathering, getting married, and moving in. Ends are not universally bad (some of you look forward to graduating this year), beginnings are not unfailingly good (remember your first day in braces?), and both make for hard living in their turn. Change just happens, and when it does, we have a choice as to how we deal with it.

By now most of you have heard that my time as president of Montreat College is coming to an end. Nine years ago this week, Montreat selected me to be its seventh President, and since that time I have experienced enormous joys, developed many wonderful relationships, and seen God work miracle after miracle. I have also seen much tragedy and sickness, financial and emotional struggle. There are many red-letter moments, but when I think back over my time here, these are not what come first to mind. A thousand little things, ordinary moments, have become precious to me in retrospect. Adam Ripley impersonating Lloyd Davis, joining students sledding down Appalachian Way, grilling steaks with the guys on the decks of Howerton and Davis, telling love stories in McGregor lobby—these are the fabric of Montreat to me. There were also countless small victories in our work together, too quickly eclipsed by the next task. Though they were passed over at the time, I celebrate now (and I hope you will celebrate with me) the little things that make this place what it is, and keep it rolling hour by hour. This is an unforgettable place, full of students and faculty who have held together through good times and bad, bringing out the best and bearing with the worst in each other day by day.

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1 New International Version
Now, for better or worse, change is coming to my life and to the college. The way we handle this time of transition will bear witness to our love for one another and the hope we hold in Christ Jesus. I want to tell you a few stories about the Montreat that I have known.

Some of you will remember Howard Fisher. Our soccer field is now named in his honor and there is a beautiful stone marker commemorating his life and legacy at Montreat College. Howard came from Jamaica to Montreat brimming with hope, enthusiasm, energy, and a legendary white-toothed grin. While some people live complaining about food, inconvenience, and perceived slights, Howard radiated joy and thankfulness. He was delighted to have his own bed to sleep in each night. He couldn’t believe his good fortune at being able to eat all he wanted three times a day. He was thrilled to have more than one pair of shoes, and even Ebenezer Scrooge could not have stayed grumpy in his presence. Howard was a charmer. He had a magnetic personality, drawing people to him and infecting them with his contagious confidence. He made Montreat his American family—even calling my wife “Mom,” to her delight.

Howard was an amazing physical specimen. Six foot six, 200 plus pounds of solid muscle with eight pack abs that made Greek statues look under-developed, Howard could run, jump, catch and kick like nobody’s business. He led our men’s soccer team up from the ashes to the top of the conference.

What I want to call your attention to today is that as much as we loved Howard, there would be no Howard Fisher Memorial Field had he not met an untimely death. You see, in Howard’s senior year, at the height of his physical strength and relational prowess, shortly after competing in the conference tournament, he became ill. He called us on Christmas, as he did every year, and told us he wasn’t feeling well. The next day he went to the hospital, and a month later he died.

Howard is proof that there is no such thing as invincible. He is also a reminder that even a short life can be a victory—he had time to be a hero. And he had no more time than you. However it is you’re planning to live later—practice now. Howard is a good example of how to live before disaster strikes.

But sometimes change doesn’t take us away from where we are, instead it forces us to engage our surroundings with more intensity than ever. For instance, we have had a couple of natural disasters hit Montreat during my time here.
In 2004 two hurricanes sat over Montreat in the space of a week. Flood waters damaged many buildings and panicked parents wrote asking if the dam might burst. I had some fun reminding them that water flows downhill and that the college was above the dam. Then I got to laugh at myself when someone pointed out that I had spelled dam “D-A-M-N.”

The funniest thing to me is that I remember those days so fondly. Something about the weather as an external antagonist made us into a team. I remember rushing back from Raleigh, wearing out my windshield wipers on the drive to witness the damage. Expecting a grim scene, I was instead greeted by a smiling Al Edwards, our head engineer, and several students already out shoveling and sandbagging.

Professors Brian Joyce, Mark Lassiter, and Rich Gray were the first to greet me the morning I woke to find trees crashed into the Anderson house roof, fence, and yard. Sporting a chain saw and smiles these men had driven straight to Montreat as soon as they heard that a microburst had leveled some of their beloved campus and there were people here who needed them. Ever ready to do small or large services for students, colleagues, or the college and town, these professors were soon joined by dozens of students, creating a small army which made short work of nature’s detritus and got Montreat College back in operation.

Much like bad weather, the economy of the last few years has threatened this community and caused many uncomfortable changes. David Friedrichs and Jared Nielson, current SGA president and predecessor respectively, saw these challenges as an opportunity to rally students together to make a difference for the college. Jared, now Alumni Coordinator, greeted layoffs at the college last January—an unfortunately too common occurrence in our world these days—with an admonition to students: “We can complain and go away at the end of this semester, or we can become part of the solution and make this year a great one. Which will it be?” Then he gave students many ways to be part of the solution. David came in to last fall with a will to make it one of Montreat’s finest. He succeeded, making lots of fun ways to contribute to our community’s life, mobilizing other student leaders, and calling people to worship. I have learned from these men, and I thank them. You can too.

If Howard is a good example of how to live well before catastrophe hits, and these students and professors demonstrate how to work well within a problem as it is happening, Bill Forstchen is a great illustration of how to make good out of the aftermath. Rather than closing himself off in response to difficult life situations, Bill allowed the community to minister to him in his time of need, and paid a sort of tribute to those friendships in fiction. A master storyteller, Bill’s books are full of ordinary people who, when confronted with terrible things, do extraordinary deeds.
And, he’ll be the first to tell you, he fashions the people in his books after people he knows in real life.

Once, while sitting at a graduation ceremony (where I was convinced that every eye was on me at the podium), he was looking out at the students, imagining how they would react to a disaster of unspeakable proportions. He imagined students who would save the lives of their community by caring for each other and by working together in hardship. A few feverish writing-sprees later, he had a new novel. I won’t tell you the plot of his book “One Second After”, but I will tell you that during the lowest times it was students at Montreat College who cared for him, prayed for him, and acted with uncommon courage. He wrote some of the best of those students into his book as heroes. (I made it in too, but wound up dead, as has happened in another of his books. Maybe there’s some message I’m missing.) Bill’s book is a vote of confidence in the ability of people to overcome the hardest times—it is a New York Times Best Selling declaration of faith in you.

Romans 8:28 reminds us that “all things work together for good for those who trust the Lord.” And in John 16:33 Jesus says, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

The goal is to live with the joy of the Lord as our strength, regardless of circumstances, and I have seen this happening in Montreat from day one: Dottie Shuman’s glow as she explained the Christ-centered mission of the college to me when I was just a curious stranger in jeans and a bomber jacket; Don King’s world-renowned zeal for Lewisian literature; the robust voice of the choir under Timothy Wilds; the excellence and gusto of our sports teams and the volume of their fans; the playful spirit of Pan Day; the conscientious care for creation, especially here in our stunning mountain home; the diligence of our student workers, and of every member of the staff and faculty who are dedicating the best of themselves to protect and sustain the blessing that is Montreat College.

I hear it in your conversations, I see it in your faces, I recognize the power of God in Montreat students while you are on campus and in the amazing missions upon which you embark after graduation, from international sports ministry, to inner city outreach, to pursuing further study in your field—your potential is virtually unlimited if you go forth from this place having put all your fight into your work and all your faith into your Savior.

You probably picked this school based on some set of numbers: rates of acceptance into grad school, price minus scholarship money, miles away from home, student to faculty ratio, etcetera.
Nevertheless, the true measure of an institution is the quality of its people and their interactions with one another. In “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis points out, “You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”

We tend to think of it the other way around: that our cultures and the land that we live on are far more durable than our dust-to-dust lifetimes. But Lewis insists that it is not our individual accomplishments, nor even the doings of our entire age, that carry weight in eternity. Rather it is the interactions invisible on a transcript that carry us and our neighbors into forever. Relationships are the only investment you can make in the Kingdom safe from perpetual change.

I consider myself incalculably blessed by my relationships within the Montreat community. You have taught me so much. You have greatly enriched my family’s life. I will remember this community forever—you have changed me. If this is your first time in Montreat, be warned that this is a place that hangs on no matter where else life takes you. I challenge each of you to become part of the reason that stays true. This will be the last time I wear this medal and it may be the last time I wear this robe. While there are things I can’t take with me, I will always have my memories, and I will have many relationships. I will always have my family – My wife, Karen, who has been with me every step of the way, a partner in every endeavor. My daughter, Mandi, who helped me write this speech, and Ben who makes us all stop to play. I love you all very much. I thank each and every one of you.

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2 C.S. Lewis, Weight of Glory, 9.