

**“In Season, and Out of Season”**  
**Pastor Norwood N. “Woody” Hingle III, Ph.D.**  
**Sunday, January 31, 2021**

What is the best of the four seasons? God has blessed us with four seasons— Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall— even though some cynics may say that New Orleans has only two seasons! Our seasons just don’t last as long as states to the north of us. E.g., my favorite season is the Spring— and I am convinced it is the best!. I *love* the Spring. It is warmer in the Spring, but not too warm. The flowers are coming out. My favorite Spring bloom comes out— azaleas, even though they only last for about two weeks. School is about to let out for Summer vacation. And to top it off, my Mom’s birthday, my dog’s birthday (the dog I had growing up, Rex), and my birthdays are in the Spring! So I think that is pretty much proof positive, “objectively speaking”, that Spring is the *best* season of all! The question for me and you is do we allow allow the other seasons which are not our favorite prevent us from doing what we need to be doing? In the hot Summer months of July and August, do I still get out and run, or in my least favorite season, Winter, to I go out and run when it is in the 40’s and a 20-mile-an-hour wind is blowing off the lake? It is important indeed to be doing what we need to be doing regardless whether the season is to our liking. The question for us is not only whether we are doing our important things like exercise in seasons we don’t like, but are we also practicing our faith? And how do we practice our faith in undesirable seasons? Paul addresses this in our text today, which will be helpful as I give our annual State of the Union address to review briefly 2020.

READ 2 Timothy 4:1-5 (p. 213)

**CONTEXT:** Paul is writing his final letter from prison in Rome around 67 AD to Timothy who is in Ephesus. He is reminding Timothy of kind of life he needs to lead— one faithful to the one true faith and one which is willing to suffer for the gospel. He reminds Timothy to stay submitted to Scripture in 3:16-17.

“In the ministry areas of attendance, outreach with the gospel, and finances, Lake Vista UMC has been stable and growing. We can anticipate 2021 to be like 2020, i.e., a year marked by transition.” Ok, let me explain. We have something in common with the rest of the world: 2020 was a difficult year. For some people more difficult than for others, to be sure. But when we compare 2020 to 2019 in attendance, outreach with the gospel, and finances— three important areas of any ministry— we have had some good things happen. In attendance, the average worship attendance in 2019 was 38. In 2020, average in-person attendance was down 10, to 28. For in-person worship from June 14th through December the average attendance was 25. That takes into account in-person attendance pre-COVID, March 15 and before that date, and when we started back with in-person worship in the second week of June. But there are two encouraging points here. First, we added livestreamed worship services on Facebook, which we are still doing at present, and the average “engaged” attenders online (“engaged” being the type of view to be counted, from what I understand) was 63. So,  $25 + 63 = 88$  people on average attending our worship services, both online and in-person. Thus we have effectively more than doubled our outreach in the worship services compared to 2019! The second encouraging point is that, from anecdotal evidence of my conversations with a few other pastors, average in-person worship is half what their regular in-person worship was, but our in-person worship after June 14th is 66% of the average in-person worship from 2019! We have kept our small groups in the SPA Ladies Bible study going, as well as Men’s Sunday School Class and Wednesday Night 7:00 PM Bible Study and Addressing the Skeptics

Class, all by Zoom. Moreover, our Wednesday SONrise services by Zoom have over double the attendance we had pre-COVID. What about outreach with the gospel? In 2019 the number of people we estimated that we served b community ministries for outreach, justice, and mercy was 456, and in 2020 we estimated 140 persons were served. That may sound like much less number of people served, but if we factor in the fact that in 2020 we did not have a youth mission trip, VBS, or prayer walks (except for one month), we actually did really well. We sponsored about 22 children with Angel Tree, sponsored about 15-20 families with food baskets for Second Harvest, made regular donations to Second Harvest during the year, and helped those who suffered hurricane damage in Lake Charles. When we considered we served an estimate of 140 people with the love of the gospel during a worldwide pandemic, I think we did wonderful! And how about financially? In 2019 our total income for the year was \$196,375.59; in 2020 our total income was \$214,843.72— or about \$18,468.13. You may say, “Yes, but didn’t we get the government Payroll Protection Plan (PPP) funds in 2020?” And indeed we did. But if you take those funds out we still exceeded last year’s income by 968.13! We may need those PPP funds in the months ahead, and it is a blessing to know we have them in case we may need them. We paid off our Conference and District Apportionments by October, which I do not think we have ever done for the over 20 years since I have been here! Moreover, we were good stewards of our spending and expenses, as our actual expenses were \$7,447 less than we had budgeted. Expenses like our electric, gas, and water bills were reduced because of our limited use of the buildings during COVID. This past week we have set our 2021 budget, and it is one we believe we can meet and is a very good budget, even though our pledge total for 2021 is a bit less than for 2020. In 2020 our pledges came to \$123,440, and for 2021 our pledge total is currently \$108,900, or about 12% less, and I must say that despite the COVID pandemic your generosity and faithfulness remain and are truly impressive. As I have said, we have a good

budget we can meet for the coming year, by God's grace. So now I think you can understand why I say that, by God's grace, the ministry at Lake Vista UMC is both stable and growing. We are heading to a year of 2021 marked by transition in at least three ways. First, we will be transitioning, hopefully, from lockdowns and masks from COVID to a more open society with the advent of the vaccines. Second, The United Methodist Church has its General Conference scheduled for August 29-September 7, during which Conference we are expected to separate as a denomination. However, it is unclear how, or even whether, this Conference will happen as scheduled, because of COVID and the fact that our General Conference is an international event. We can expect to find out more information on General Conference by the end of February. Third, we seem to have challenges to freedom of speech in the U.S. with the new administration. The editor for the publication *National Review*, Rich Lowry, has written an article in this morning's *Times-Picayune New Orleans Advocate* (6B, "Don't have second thoughts on First Amendment") where he refers to an article in the *Washington Post* where "columnist Max Boot drew a direct line between how we deal with foreign terror groups and how we should treat right-wing media organizations. 'We need,' he wrote, to shut down the influencers who radicalize people and set them on the path toward violence and sedition.' Book noted, approvingly, that the U.K. Doesn't have the equivalent of Fox news because regulators won't allow it." Lowry is quick to note that "the U.K. doesn't have a First Amendment". Indeed, it is odd that the modern media would like to curb freedom of speech, a privilege the media has always seen in the past as sacrosanct. Lowry also notes that Richard Stengel, former managing editor of *Time* magazine, has stated, "All speech is not equal. And where truth cannot drive out lies, we must add new guardrails". The question, of course, is who is to determine what is truth and what is a lie. We have always relied on airing out positions in the marketplace of ideas to help people determine truth. One is reminded of the line in George Orwell's *Animal*

*Farm* which goes, “All animals are equals, but some are more equal than others”. We need to be in prayer for the protection of freedom of speech, as this has direct implications for the Church.

I sense the Lord has put on my heart a wonderful passage from 2 Timothy 4:1-5 to guide us as we advance through the year 2021. READ vv 1-2. “Paul sets his solemn urging in the proper context and focuses on what needs to be seen in Timothy’s charge.” Paul makes this solemn urging to Timothy in the context of God and Jesus, who is coming with His Kingdom and He will judge the living and the dead. Paul notes in this letter that his life’s end is near (v 6), and it is believed he was executed in Rome around 67 AD, the last year or two of Nero’s reign. For Paul at this time in Rome, he knew that death was in the air. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing around 90 AD of Nero’s reign, stated, “First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned— not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcial. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacal, and exhibited displays in the Circus, at which he mingled with the crowd— or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest” (*Annals of Imperial Rome*, 15.44). Death was in the air, but the Ruler and Judge of the living and the dead knew what was happening, and He was coming. So Timothy is to keep faithful to his charge of preaching the Word/gospel, being persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, as in the NRSV— or as the RSV, ESV, REB, NASV, NIV and KJV have it, in season or out of season. Literally, it is ἐπίστηθι εὐκαίρως ἀκαίρως, or “standing at the ready [in] good/convenient time [and] bad/inconvenient time”. I am amazed at the faithfulness of our brothers and

sisters overseas who proclaim the gospel when it is out of season, or unfavorable. E.g, I recall reading a few years ago a large church in China had an open-air Easter service, and the government quickly broke it up and arrested many people. But the church keeps growing, despite the unfavorable, unseasonable reception by the authorities. And so are you and I to bring the gospel— with all patience and teaching, literally, or as the NIV has it, “with great patience and careful teaching”. We do this not alone, but in the presence of the One who is to judge the living and the dead.

READ vv 3-4. “Paul warns there will be times when people’s worldviews will seem upside - down, because they will be!” Sometimes it feels like we are living in a time where down is up and up is down, where good is bad and bad is good. E.g., many in our culture and political systems of government exalt those struggling with transgenderism as a good thing, even with this week it being said that our military will allow transgendered person to join the military. I cannot help but think that if transgenderism causes confusion in schools and workplaces, then how much more confusion will it bring in a stressful, close-living quarters arrangement like the military with life and death situations! Even in The UMC there is one annual conference that has ordained a transgendered person. This is a clear expression of unsound doctrine for itching ears, i.e., an insatiable curiosity to explore what is in the human heart rather than the heart of God. Our position as Christians is clear— we treat all people with respect, kindness, and compassion, but we do not applaud or give approval to behavior that God does not approve.

READ v 5. “Paul also focuses on what needs to be seen in Timothy’s character.” He is to be sober-minded— i.e., clear thinking and in self-control. He is to be willing to suffer for the gospel. He is to be an evangelist. And he is to carry out his ministry fully. These are the marching orders for Timothy and his personal character. Have you ever seen such character? E.g., I recall once having a conversation with a young man who used to lead our youth group, Nate. He was

in seminary at the time and wanted to go on a mission trip to Indonesia, but he didn't know if he should. He was getting married soon, and Indonesian is a Muslim country where sharing the gospel is outlawed. He was determined to go, and I counseled him to think and pray carefully about whether to go. He did go, and had a productive trip for the gospel, and he had wonderful stories of ministering to Christians and hiding from the authorities who got word of his being there. E.g., I also think of you with v 5, of being sober—which is meant both literally and figuratively. Some of you have struggled with alcohol abuse, and with God's help have stopped drinking completely. I see so many of you doing the work of evangelists, looking for opportunities to share the gospel in a loving, relevant way, and to defend the gospel, even reading books by those who oppose the gospel. You are willing to suffer for the gospel, to be disliked if that is necessary, because of your belief in Jesus.

“What do you and I need to fulfill the ministry the Lord has given to us in 2021, whether it is a year of ‘in season’ or ‘out of season’?” Spiritually, do we run the race for Christ in only good weather, or bad weather too? That question is our “assignment” for the week as we ask this before the Lord in our daily devotional times.