

Keeping It Real
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, 3:1-11
First Presbyterian Church
May 2, 2021

Introduction to the Readings

Just a reminder that we are in the middle of a short sermon series from the Old Testament wisdom literature... a part of the Bible that, frankly, doesn't get much attention, at least from preachers. And full disclosure, Heather and I now know why. The past two weeks we have explored the Book of Proverbs... today we move to the Book of Ecclesiastes... and when we hear this morning's texts you will notice that though they are both considered wisdom literature, they really couldn't be more different. You see, the book of Proverbs has a fairly OPTIMISTIC AND POSITIVE view of what can be known about wisdom and about the prospects for living a wise life. Proverbs assumes an eager student in the front row – the hand-raiser, the curve-buster, (for Harry Potter fans) the Hermione Granger in the class. The books of Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, represents more of a Charlie Brown type of worldview. The author of this book has seen Lucy snatch the football away from Charlie one too many times. And while this worldview acknowledges that knowledge and effort and skill are worthy, they are ultimately meaningless. Though the town where the author of Ecclesiastes lives is not named “Cynical” or “Jaded,” you can sure see them from there. And here's the interesting thing – Ecclesiastes is written by a faithful churchman... A teacher... perhaps even a preacher. So, these are not the questions and musings of an atheist or an agnostic. They are, however, the questions and musing of a believer who wants to keep it real.¹

First Reading – Ecclesiastes 1:1-9

The words of the Teacher,^{*} the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

² Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,^{*}
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?

⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.

¹ John Goldingay, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs for Everyone, (WJK,2014), p. 176-177.

⁸ All things* are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
⁹ What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Second Reading – Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ⁹What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Sermon

Have you ever been to a Corn Maze?² On a crisp fall day, maybe around Halloween or Thanksgiving? If you look at the maze from the outside... from the perimeter... it looks like a harmless old corn field. I saw lots of these in my five years in Iowa – and they can be very beautiful; especially at certain times during the growing season.

So, from the outside a corn maze looks harmless. However, it is a very different view when you stuck in the middle... the inside... trying to find your way out.

And then of course, the view is even more changed if you are in a helicopter above or taking it in through the camera of a drone. Then you'd see just how the maze is cut into the corn... you'd see the order and pattern of the rows... and the know the whole route... everything would be explained.

Three different locations... three very different perspectives. I think this idea is helpful when interpreting these passages from Ecclesiastes. In order to appreciate the wisdom of what “the Teacher” presents, we need to see it from the outside for a **positive** perspective... from the inside for a **negative** perspective... and up-above for an **ultimate** perspective.

² This idea comes from Lora Copley, Beyond the Lectionary Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, Center for Excellence in Preaching. This commentary can be found at <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/non-rcl-starters/ecclesiastes-31-11/>

The Outside.

From the outside everything looks pretty safe...pretty orderly... pretty positive.

We find ourselves humming along with the Byrds (or our worship team) - *Turn, Turn, Turn* — and pointing to the truth that “for everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

A time to take control and a time to relinquish it...

a time to give help and a time to receive it...

a time to teach and a time to learn...

a time to accumulate and a time to give away...

a time to keep searching for more sermon material

a time to work as hard as you can at your career

and a time to retire.

When we look at our lives... or as the Teacher says, when we look at everything we do and experience “under the sun” ... we tend to think of one as being preferable to the other – being born is preferable to dying... healing is preferable to killing... dancing is preferable to mourning... love us preferable to hate... peace is preferable to war. But that’s not always true, is it? And that’s not the way this Teacher sees it... you may have noticed that sometimes the positive comes first, other times the negative comes first... because the Teacher doesn’t assign positive or negative value – these are simply the realities of human life as God made it... that for every course of action in one direction, there will occur in due time an equal and opposite reaction... each activity, whether positive or negative, has its place/season, and the seasons themselves have their place in the rhythm of the ever-circling years.³ This viewpoint from the “outside” affirms that the presence of the sovereign God lies behind these realities.. that there is a certain order and rhythm that God has put in creation. And though we long to understand the big picture” about our lives and God’s plan and purposes, we can’t – human wisdom only goes so far... so it is best for us to remain humble... to fear the Lord, as we heard two weeks ago... and to live a good life, a moral life. That is the outside location.

The Inside.

But now we walk deeper into this text and into the corn maze of our lives where the world isn’t so neat and positive. Like the pilgrim in the comics who climbs the mountain to reach the guru, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes sets out to understand the meaning of life. He wants to know, as someone put it: how to “*avoid getting all As in all my subjects, but end up flunking life?*” So, he explores every earthly pleasure... every bit of wealth and power, achievement, and success, even a variety of philosophies and religions. Everything that people SAY makes life meaningful, he looks at... and his conclusion after all of this exploration is captured by actor Jim Carrey in an interview: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”⁴ Instead, the Teacher comes to understand that all of these things are “hevel” – a word he uses throughout the book that literally means “breath” or “vapor” and is variously translated as meaningless or vanity.

³ William P. Brown in his commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Interpretation Series (WJK,2000), p. 41.,

⁴ Reader’s Digest, March 2006

Well, it is here... on the inside of the maze... that the Teacher keeps it really, REALLY, real. Because he has seen that despite a person's worldly successes, a single fate comes to us all... and that fate is death. This week I read that right now there are about 200,000 centenarians – folks over 100 - and by 2050 that number will be four times that. But eventually, a single fate comes to all. Well, this topic – which lots of folks don't want to even think about – comes up again and again in Ecclesiastes and in the Old Testament as a whole – all being well, you are born, you grow up, you live your life, you grow old, you die, and you join your ancestors in the family tomb.

Well, THAT'S uplifting, Whit! So let me move quickly to the third perspective on this corn maze of life – we've looked at it from the outside... from the inside – and now, we look from “up above.”

The Up Above.

And for this we turn to verse 10: *I have seen the undertaking that God has given human beings to be busy with. YET...yet He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.*” In this verse, it's almost like the Teacher opens a window in the skies and through that window allows us to glimpse God making everything beautiful in its time. And we see God setting eternity in our hearts... something more than the present ticks of the clock and cycles of the seasons... something more than earthly things and accomplishments - the word here means “forever” – we see God setting “forever” in our hearts.

And what does that mean except that God has put INTO US a yearning to understand the “big picture” – a longing to make sense of our lives and about God's activity in the world. This is the part of us that in a difficult time screams: “If I just knew what God was doing here, I think I could make it! If I just could figure out how this fits into the plan, I could persevere.” Well, be assured the Teacher believes there IS such a big picture... and that with God there is meaning to this earthly existence... but he knows FROM EXPERIENCE that we can't know what it is... we just can't know what God is doing... and why God is doing it... we can't know what it all means.

But here's the thing, not knowing what God is up to... not being able to see the big picture... this doesn't plunge the Teacher into despair... it doesn't cause him to give up. Instead, it leads him to enjoy what he CAN KNOW... and do what he CAN DO during his life “under the sun.” And that is to his enjoy life... to do what is good... to eat good food and drink good wine... to enjoy his labor and the fruits of his labor... to accept these “simple gifts” that God has given... as well as the limitations God has placed on him.⁵ In other words, the Teacher says, there is joy to be found in the ordinary things of life. And not only the “THINGS” of life, but the PEOPLE in our lives.

Later in the book – and in one of my favorite passages – we hear these wise words about the value of the people in our lives – the value of marriage and family and friendships: “Two are better than one,” the Teacher says, “because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

⁵ Goldingay, p. 189.

Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”⁶ The Teacher knows the value of the people in our lives.

Well, you have surely realized by now that this book does not contain the fullness of the Gospel as we have come to know it in Jesus Christ... for instance, there is no concept of resurrection here – no notion of eternal life - Ecclesiastes (like Proverbs) is only concerned with how to “live well” this earthly life we are given. So, what is the word of the Lord in this book... or since this is wisdom literature, what is the word to the wise we find here? I think at least two things. First, is the wisdom that teaches that there are many seasons in human life. The world which God has fashioned includes ups and downs, sunrises and sunsets, joys and sorrows, life, and death. These seasons enrich our appreciation of the fullness of life... and can teach us that there is much joy to be found in our ordinary, day-to-day existence. Which IS the second bit of wisdom – that there is good in what we might call the “living arts” of loving one’s work and leisure... good food and drink... family and friends.

There is value, the Preacher says, in finding joy and love and meaning in the ordinary things of life.⁷ Yes, we are all going to die... but may that fact not lead us to despair... but to humility and to delight in the good gifts of God; even though we know they won’t last forever. And may we trust that the God who created the heavens and the earth and who holds the “big picture” will also hold us... both in this life and in the next.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 4:7-9

⁷ Rolf Jacobson: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-wisdom/commentary-on-proverbs-11-7-31-8-822-36-101-12-ecclesiastes-11-18-218-26-31-8>