

To Everything a Season
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Reading

selections from Ecclesiastes:

Vanity of vanity, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity.
What do the people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The sun still rises, and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the
wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.

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

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has
long ago approved what you do.
Life is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.
Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all.

Sermon

Today I'm inviting us to step back from the news of the day, which has been so intensely
in our minds these days; and explore what we could name a wider perspective on our lives.

Ecclesiastes is a strange enough book that over the centuries many have wondered what it
is doing in the Bible.

In any case, I'm glad it's there; otherwise I would never have encountered it during my
college years or been able to return to it in all the decades since.

A strange book indeed.

If you've never read the book, you got some of the gist of this strangeness in the reading
this morning: Nothing new under the sun, and it is all sort of tiresome. Even so... eat and drink
and enjoy every year of your life... as God wants you to do.

Yet in a way the most interesting aspect of the book is not this general conclusion, but
how the writer gets there.

Now, traditionally the book is ascribed to King Solomon. Maybe so, maybe not.
Sometimes the writer is simply called "Teacher" or "Preacher". Whomever it was, it is clear that
the writer was an older man of enough privilege to have had the leisure and resources to explore
the meaning of life in a variety of ways unavailable to most others.

And as he explores, he sees the contradictions in life:

The evil sometimes prosper while the good suffer.

You put in a lot of work to build a business, and the next person comes along and squanders it.

People are never satisfied with riches, however much they have.

And so on. It's all vanity, vanity of vanities.

(About that word: Not exactly "vanity" as we usually think of it - apparently the Hebrew is not easy to translate – but it means something like insubstantial, like a puff of wind.)

Anyway, near the outset of the book, the writer (whether teacher, preacher, king...) tells us that seeing all this he thought he would "make a test of pleasure" to see if that would satisfy him. So he became rich and created beautiful gardens, had huge flocks and herds of animals, bought slaves to serve his every whim, sing and dance for him, "delights of the flesh and many concubines."

"I kept my heart from no pleasure" he said.

And what do you know? "All is vanity." Nothing satisfied.

Next? He "turned to consider wisdom" – and saw that indeed, yes, the wise are better off than the foolish... but everyone, wise or foolish, rich or poor, comes to the same end. So he wonders, "How can the wise die just like fools?"

"So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after the wind."

Worse: "I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun."

Well, reading all this... all this in the first two brief chapters of this twelve chapter book... are we depressed yet?

But then comes chapter three, which we heard Rich Jensen sing earlier this morning, and which I often sing (with thanks to Pete Seeger for setting the words to music). "To everything a season and a time for every purpose under heaven..." somehow suggesting a way to be at peace in the midst of all the contradictions of life, to be at peace even as we experience that neither pleasure, riches, or even wisdom give life meaning or satisfaction.

How could this be?

And how is it that this book appealed to a twenty-year-old and almost fifty years later holds its appeal the same guy?

For the twenty-year-old me? Well, that's a tumultuous time of life – it certainly was for me. Wondering what to do with my life, wondering if I'd find someone to spend my life with, have a family, and all this in the midst of the Vietnam War and a divided nation. For me at the time, I guess the book's appeal had to do with the way this man of great and varied experience, this guy who tried this and tried that, finding that so much that the world claimed would bring happiness did no such thing...even so managed eventually to come to peace with that, so that maybe we should take life as it comes, enjoy our lot – our work, the people we love, food and drink... as best we can.

And now, all these years later, at a very different time of life, yet at the same time in another era of national division? Maybe a pretty similar appeal, though for me in a different life context. So though I'm not wealthy or powerful like the writer of Ecclesiastes, I am well aware that I have been very blessed, privileged in fact, in having found my way to a satisfying vocation, a beautiful community, and beautiful natural surroundings, and above all a family filled with love.

Even so, the enduring questions raised by the Teacher of Ecclesiastes remain, though in the context of a different life stage. They are, after all, enduring questions: What's it all about? Why is life often unfair? Why do we all come to the same end no matter how we've lived? And so on. So the book maintains its appeal.

Back, then, to the answers of the book? In my own words, maybe it could be put this way: Don't exhaust and depress yourself looking hither and yon for life's meaning writ large; rather, be present where you are, be present for the people you are with, family, friends, community; do what you can where you are with what you've got to help and heal.

As the writer puts it later in the book: "Cast your bread upon the waters." Implied? You can't control where it goes from there.

Yes, do your work with no attachment to the fruits, as another ancient text, the Bhagavad Gita puts it: whether your "work" is as a parent, friend, preacher, teacher, plumber, carpenter, doctor, musician, social activist. Do your work, do your part and let the uncontrollable results be what they will be.

Look, of course this life is not all enjoyable... our work, our toil, is not always fun... people we love die, we will die. But, at risk of repeating myself (though not as much as the writer of Ecclesiastes) what the Teacher is telling us has to do with, even so, fully engaging in whatever you are doing, even the routine, even the parts of our work or our lives that we may sometimes experience as boring or even odious... fully engage.

If some of this sounds a bit Buddhist... well I'm pretty sure I preached a sermon a long time ago about this book titled "The Bible's Hidden Buddhist."

After all, wisdom is wisdom, whatever the source.

This said (to draw to the end for this morning) one of the beauties of the book, for me, is that the writer, whoever he was, was just a guy trying to figure it all out, searching for meaning. Yes, we can tell from the text that he was likely a rich guy, even a powerful guy, but otherwise just like the rest of us as far as this quest or search is concerned.

And he outlines his search with disarming honesty, frequently contradicting himself, and often repeating himself (clearly he needed a better editor!). Told us how he tried this and tried that and in the end came back to, as you've heard this morning and I'll say it yet again, some pretty simple answers: life lived simply, present to the gift of life even in the midst of challenge and sorrow, do the right thing as best you can, and maybe don't worry so much about the big questions you can't answer... all of which, as the writer affirms in the theological language of his time and place, is what God wants us to do.

Translating the theological part however you like, the Teacher wrote: "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."

Blessed be. Amen.

Benediction

From *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman:

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,
In things best known to you finding the best or as good as the best,
In folks nearest to you finding also the sweetest and strongest and lovingest,
Happiness not in another place, but this place...
not for another hour, but this hour.

So it is. So may it always be.