

I feel that I handled the distribution of preaching texts very well this month. Mairi had to preach on the hard part of Ecclesiastes, and I get to preach on the fun part. Last week she had to deal with Qohelet's bleak view of the world and find some good news. This week I think the good news is a lot easier to find, but first bear with me while I pick out the parts of the reading that I want to amplify.

The first section poses the question, what does my life add up to? Conventional wisdom had it that if you led a good life, your memory would be perpetuated by your descendants. But Qohelet, the writer, points out that after a few generations that is simply not so. Nor is it the case that good people necessarily lead happy and fulfilling lives, or that the wicked receive justice. Qohelet sees the world as always busy—the sun running its course only to start over again, rivers running to the sea without ever filling it—but individuals within the world are transitory, ephemeral, profoundly small.

There is nothing new under the sun, and we can all recognize the truth of that. Ron just reminded us last week that fifty years ago young people were marching against racism, and even though we have the Civil Rights Act and other legislation, those young people are now old people marching against racism, and a new crop of young people has joined the cycle. Technology has changed, but human beings do not seem to have progressed ethically or spiritually. What seems new is new only if you don't know history.

In the second section of the reading, Qohelet says that there is a season for everything under heaven, and he lists out fourteen pairs of opposites. Fourteen is twice seven, which signifies completeness. It's intentionally a long list, because he's conveying the notion of the breadth of human experience. It's not prescriptive, like "yes, this is a good time for war," it's

descriptive: in every life, these times come around. You can like it, you can not like it. It happens, and it will pass. What it will not do is “add up” to a prize or penalty at the end—and why should it? If your model of life is a budget document with net profit or net loss at the bottom, you have made a serious category mistake! Life is rich and varied; we pass through it and it passes through us. Are you anxious that your present happiness may wear away, and you may lose someone precious? It will, and you will, and then another season of happiness will return. You might be having a hard time now, and the people who care for you can’t fix it, but that’s within the human experience, and the suffering will pass away. Ecclesiastes is traditionally read for the festival of Sukkoth, a joyous harvest festival when Jews are supposed to build leafy structures outdoors and spend their time out there, celebrating (originally) their harvest. Of course next season they would have to start over again tilling the fields and planting your crops. Sukkoth is a celebration of the present moment. Harvest is not something you achieve once and move on; it’s part of a rich cycle through which we move repeatedly. Experience the seasons; don’t try to add them up. They’re not quantifiable.

Krista Tippett recently interviewed a therapist and trauma specialist named Resmaa Menakem, who works in the Twin Cities. Early in the interview, she did her own little Qohelet homage, saying,

I was born in 1960. So I feel like those of us who lived through the ’60s . . . there was a lot of progress. It felt like a lot of progress was made. A lot of new laws were passed that were revolutionary, in their way. And it’s true in many areas, including with gender, with the relationships between men and women, but it’s absolutely true around race. And I felt like we changed the laws, but we didn’t change ourselves.

She goes on to say that working on ideology and public policy and politics was not the fix people had hoped for, which is why Menakem’s work is so interesting: he says that the real

battlefield is within our bodies. “If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict needs to be resolved”; that “the vital force [behind] white supremacy is in our nervous systems.” <https://onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/#transcript>

Referring to epigenetics, the idea that trauma can cross generations, Menakem says that whatever trauma we’re born with is decontextualized. We don’t know where it came from. “If my mom is born, as a black woman, into a society that predicates her body as deviant, the amount of cortisol that is in her nervous system when I’m being born is teaching my nervous system something.

“Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture.”

He goes on to say that the trauma inflicted on black people by white people came, in turn, from

trauma inflicted on white people by white people, except that the concept of whiteness didn’t yet exist. Referring to the period between 500 CE and 1500 CE in Europe, the era of feudalism, he points out that for most people, who were poor, the experience was one of land theft, enslavement, imperialism, colonialism, genocide. The Middle Ages was a time of trauma for poor people, brutalized by rich people. And then that traumatized body came to these shores and did it all again. It’s in the 1600s that the white body became the standard of humanity in America — not merchants, not landowners — the white body.

A couple years later is when you start to see white persons show up in Virginia law. By the time they offered that to poor white people, they said, “Ey, you want to be white?” After all of that brutality, white people said, “You mean, all I gotta do is be white, and my babies may not have to go through that? Yeah, I’ll take that. Let’s take that.” And

that's what sewed it in. So now they saw their allegiance more with white landowners than the enslaved Africans that they were rebelling with.

To make a long story short, Menakem says that we need to address the fruits of this traumatic heritage in our bodies, not cognitively. And you just have to listen to the podcast for more specifics because that's not why I'm here, I'm here to preach the good news from a cranky old Hebrew elitist who calls himself Qohelet. But my point is, on the one hand, yes, Qohelet, there is nothing new under the sun and we will always have trauma and injustice. Fifty years ago we did not legislate racism out of existence. But on the other hand, we will also always have the relentless struggle for justice and wholeness! Fifty years ago did we have epigenetics? No we didn't. Now we do and we're not going to lie around moaning that justice was not achieved once and for all; we're going to wade into a whole new understanding of the human body and see what it can teach us.

The fallacy of modern liberal Christianity is that we can achieve the kingdom once and for all. It started when evangelicals rightly repudiated the Puritan notion of predestination and proclaimed that human beings *can* change. Then they worried about, should we wait for Jesus to come and save us all, or are we supposed to perfect ourselves and the world and *then* he'll come? Those who made the latter choice are our spiritual ancestors. They built orphanages and Sunday schools, they worked for abolition and women's suffrage, they developed prison reforms and crusaded against drunkenness. Well, bless their hearts. Those were good things to do. We're still doing them. It doesn't mean there's a big zero at the bottom of the balance sheet, because there is no balance sheet. There is a tapestry, a rich tapestry, of human experience, pain, sorrow, anger, joy, relief, triumph. Justice is worth struggling for not because

we will achieve it, but because the process, the intentions, the injuries and the triumphs, deepen us and make us wiser.

Maybe, if the struggle for justice continues to teach us things, we will learn how to overcome the unrecognized effects of trauma. Maybe the injustice which will always have its seasons can become smaller, less devastating. Qohelet says we can never see the big cosmic picture of what God is doing and so we should just live with gusto. But I'd also say that however much of the picture we can see is God's call to us to stretch and realize how very capacious we are.

God of Heaven and Earth,  
you created the one human family  
and endowed each person with great dignity.

We are finding that our bodies have much to teach us, and we pray that you would guide our explorations so that hurts we have inherited, we do not pass on.

Aid us, we pray, in overcoming racism.  
Grant us your grace in eliminating this blight  
from our hearts, our communities,  
our social and civil institutions.

Fill our hearts with the passion for our and our neighbors' wholeness  
so that, although injustice will always be with us, it may become trivial and reparable. Amen.