

Sermon – Mark 1: 21-Ecclesiastes 1:1-3; 8:16-9:18

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This summer Julia is planning to work with a selection of passages from the “Festival Scrolls” (the five scrolls read during Jewish festivals): Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Song of Songs, Ruth, and Esther. So I’m kicking off this series with a look at the Ecclesiastes passage Ron just read.

Ecclesiastes is a strange and difficult book. I rather loved the way W. Sibley Towner began the introduction to Ecclesiastes in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, so I’m going to share it:

Ecclesiastes has always had its fans among the original thinkers of the Jewish and Christian communities: skeptics, people with a dark vision of reality, recovering alcoholics. The rest of us know and love some of its individual epigrams and its more lyrical passages. On the whole, however, believers have found it at least baffling and at most wrongheaded.

I think today’s passages hold some great truth – both palatable and discouraging truth – and give us something to reflect upon, especially right now in our place in world history. But I don’t think it takes us as far as we need to go.

By the way, I learned a lot about the original Hebrew words and how they have been translated and speculation about the author and so on and it was pretty interesting, but I realize that a) a little of that goes a long way and b) you probably don’t want to listen to a three-hour sermon with a lot of etymology in it. So I’ll try to resist sharing all that, but if you ever want to talk about textual criticism of Ecclesiastes, I’m your person!

The central image of this passage is of a world in which many of the things we think are valuable or important don’t really matter – or at least don’t matter in the way we believe they do. Being good or being bad, being educated or being ignorant, being wise or being foolish, being strong or being weak, being rich or being poor, being devout or being unbelieving – they don’t make a difference. We will all die. We will all die and nothing we do now will matter or even be remembered. It is better to be alive than to be dead, but, basically, it is better because the dead know nothing and the living at least know they are going to die.

OK, let **that** soak in for a minute!

What does this mean for us? The teacher goes on to say “Go, eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart . . . Enjoy life . . . all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun – all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.” In other words, don’t kill yourself working for some goal, giving up present good for some hypothetical better. Enjoy what you have now, embrace all the good things around you. Enjoy what you do – work with vigor but enjoy it. Rejoice in the people you love. Be happy now, while you can.

That is a message many of us need to internalize. Too many of us too often work so hard for some externally focused goal that we miss things we shouldn't miss. I think about my father, who worked very hard and did great things in his profession, but only now realizes how much he missed of his children's childhoods. Or how many of us know – or have been – someone who keeps a scrupulously clean and tidy house, not from enjoyment of order but “in case someone comes by” and is unable to sit and read a good book or relax over a leisurely cup of coffee? (Personally, I have resisted that trap – the tidy house, I mean!) We don't know how much time we have on this earth so we need to recognize and relish the time and the good things we have. Don't put off happiness until a tomorrow that might not come.

There is value in that message. Too often we chain ourselves to a grindstone and miss the good things that surround us. Too often we let other people or society as a whole define us and tell us what we should be and what we should strive for. Too often we go into a field of work we like, then lose enjoyment in that work as we try to advance in the field. Ambition for the sake of ambition is a pretty meaningless thing.

But I don't find myself able to stop there. As I read this passage – over and over – I was really struck with how much it evokes us here and now, as we live life with COVID-19: “No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite their efforts to search it out no one can discover its meaning. All share a common destiny – the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: the same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live. As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.”

COVID-19, the novel coronavirus, can hit anybody. Old or young, rich or poor, good or nasty, loved or friendless. I am **not** forgetting that it is affecting people of color and the poor disproportionately more, and that it is often hardest on people with underlying conditions. That is indisputable. But it is still a virus that kills people of all ages, all physical conditions, and all economic levels. If it lodges in your lungs you can't buy it out. And you can have without knowing it and transmit it before you realize you're infected. It is very scary.

People aren't good with that kind of scary. It bothers me a lot that one phenomenon we're seeing now is what looks like people taking this enjoy-life-we're-all-going-to-die-anyway message from Ecclesiastes too seriously. Similarly, many seem to think the virus can be avoided by denying it. The government tells us the virus is over, so let's get back to normal life.

But a very important thing about this virus is that while we get it from other people – like most viruses and diseases – we ourselves are the most important and effective way to protect other people from it also. Because one can have it and be infectious without knowing it, wearing a mask protects other people from being accidentally exposed from us – as does social distancing. We need to wear masks to protect other people, not to protect ourselves (non-surgical masks aren't very effective at protecting the wearers). When we say “I'm not afraid of the virus – I know I will die someday but I will enjoy my life now by going and doing what I want, seeing

whom I want, and not wearing a mask or social distancing”, we are endangering others. We are making a choice for **them**. And I am not at all comfortable with that.

This is where Ecclesiastes’s viewpoint falls apart. It is fine to eat with gladness and drink wine with a joyful heart, to enjoy life, if you are healthy and reasonably prosperous and thinking of your own life. But to force that perspective on others, to say, in effect, “no matter that you are black and afraid to be stopped by the police because you know you could be harmed, enjoy what you do have” or “your job doesn’t pay you enough to both pay rent and eat, but hey, be joyful” just does not work. Nor does “I don’t care if I accidentally infect others as long as I have fun or are not inconvenienced”.

By the way, I know I am not telling you something new. This church understands all this.

As 21st Century white Americans, we want to believe we are in charge of our lives. We don’t want to feel at the mercy of other people; we don’t want to feel powerless before a virus we can’t see, avoid, or anticipate. We want to be able to keep ourselves and our families safe and not depend on others. I think that desire – to feel in control – is at the heart of a lot of the ignoring of the CDC guidelines. We’ve had enough. We need to feel self-determined. So we act as if we are.

If we survive this, we’re going to find out that we aren’t in control. And some people might think I’m going to say “we aren’t in control – God is”. But I’m not going to say that. Such a statement implies that God sent the coronavirus that is killing people and that God is OK with the huge disparities of income, access, safety, and opportunity in this nation. To say God is in control implies that God was control of the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Rodney King and all the others who died at the hands of uncaring or corrupt cops. To say God is in control implies that God thinks that God’s white children are more important and more worthy than God’s non-white children. And that isn’t so.

No matter what I’ve sometimes joked, I’m very fond of science. I believe in it and I trust it – understanding always that there is still a lot we don’t know. I believe in evolution and don’t think that not believing in the literal Genesis creation story diminishes God in any way. But I do think the story of the Garden of Eden is true – if not factual - in that it is the story of our choosing free will and God’s allowing us that choice. Our human free will has allowed us as human beings to do all sort of things that have had both great and dreadful consequences. The illnesses – of our society and of our physical bodies – we suffer are some of these consequences. And while God might intervene here and there – I believe in the possibility of miracles! – if the horrific things we’ve done to each other teach anything, they’ve shown that God isn’t going to start throwing lightning bolts and shaking the earth and parting the seas to shove us back in line.

And so, as we live in this pandemic, as we protest and worry and try to get it right but often get it wrong, I want us to turn from Ecclesiastes to Jesus. Jesus never told us we wouldn’t die. But Jesus taught us how to live. Jesus showed us that we are called to make other people’s lives better. We are called to help, to feed, to shelter, to befriend, to accept. We are called to listen, with ears and minds and hearts. We are called to worry about what others don’t have to enjoy even as we enjoy what we do have.

Our Ecclesiastes passage ends with

¹⁷The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one sinner destroys much good.

One sinner **can** destroy much good – and I’m sure we can all think of examples. But as we try to follow Jesus’s example and teachings, as we try to help, and feed, and support, and bring justice, we will elevate Jesus’s quiet words and their meaning so that they, slowly, will quiet the shouts of fools. I’m not very good at it – many of you are far better – but just as we can protect each other from infection by wearing masks even when we don’t think we need to, so we can inspire, support, and encourage each other as we work for justice, for compassion, for equality, for freedom, and for the Realm of God.

Let us pray: Loving and caring God, it is on us. Your beloved children must work together to reverse the inequities, heal the wounds, embody the love, and accept the changes this will bring. Help us, support us, inspire us, and forgive us when we fail. Help us to respond to the question “What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?” with the answer “We gain the realm of God”. Amen.