

Sermon: The Puzzle of Ecclesiastes Rev. Steven Wilson

As I mentioned in the opening words my initial prompt for this sermon on Ecclesiastes was a perplexed cousin who having listened to the Byrd's "Turn Turn Turn" song asked "Just how did words like a time for hate and war ever make it past all of the editors and into the bible."

Having long forgotten whatever I might have learned about Ecclesiastes, that was a provocative question, and as I often do with such provocative questions, I thought about it, didn't have an answer, forgot about it, thought about it again while driving, and before I forgot about it completely created a little word document in my future sermon's folder titled "Ecclesiastes- Why is it in the Bible?"

Being the ever-diligent scholar that I am, I let it sit there unattended for a few months, until it appeared on my list of preaching topics demanding attention about January.

So, Sandy, who I recently e-mailed my rough draft version of this too "I think I have an answer."

It is suspected that Ecclesiastes made it into the bible for a few reasons.

First, most scholars believe it was added because it was rumored to be the work of Solomon, you know- Wise King Solomon of building the temple, David's son, multiple concubines, and threatening to split the baby as a way of sorting out the real mother of a baby fame, Yah, he's important enough for them to want to include it.

However, because that's not all, scholars also believe that because about the time the Hebrew Bible was being really put together the kind of philosophical questions Ecclesiastes dealt with were in vogue, an influence from the neighboring Greeks now so famous for being thoughtful.

And, perhaps most importantly, I think it made the cut because it conveys the human predicament in such raw and rich terms it keeps it real"

In that little book written likely 23 hundred years ago we are exposed to some of the first recorded and most honest big picture meaning of life questions that every generation asks.

I believe Thomas Wolfe might be overstating it a bit when he called Ecclesiastes "the greatest single piece of writing (he) have ever known." He of course has not read some of the work of our PUC spiritual memoir writing group produces, but he is right on when he says that "the wisdom expressed in it most lasting and profound." (pause)

However, to include this in not a book, but what became the book people read for solace, for comfort is perplexing.

Truth is, I found exploring Ecclesiastes so persistently depressing, that in reading it and writing this sermon I on it, I mostly was unable to stay at it very long.

My ability to sit still for any length of time is not the best, period, but working on Ecclesiastes probably made it even tougher quite simply because that short book contains an

one of the hardest of life's lessons to accept. The fleeting and potential pointlessness of it all.

I think, or at least I like to think perhaps, that what turns people off from church these days more than hard truths is that the basic church message most thinking people hear is a far more pale; a far more sugar-coated version of life than the complex brave way most of us in the modern world now look at it with.

(I switch my tone and formal sermon style starts)

Unlike so much of the bible- which is designed to pass on historical events, build up the importance of someone we should take seriously, attempt to tell us something important via vague parables, or deliver long lists of particular rules, ...

Ecclesiastes is direct, ...philosophical, ...and essentially modern.

Ecclesiastes author, it's narrator really who describes himself as "not a but the wise all knowing "preacher" who speaks before the assembly," basically asks himself one of the questions we all eventually do.

"Just, what does all we do down here matter,"

And then proceeds to despite all his "unhumble wisdom," ...to struggle for a satisfying answer. Like me, his inability to find a clear message, fails to stop him from talking.

See our author, be he Solomon, a later king, or a host of editors centuries later, (we will never know) suggests that all we do, ...from creating wealth, ...to accumulating wisdom; from all that we might toil at building, and all that we might plan on leaving behind is all fleeting, impermanent, or in his words "vanity."

For anyone who reads the book quickly comes to realize that Ecclesiastes, version of vanity is not the "is my hair perfect, "does my butt look big vanity," but the hard observation that all is fleeting, nothing here under the sun lasts, or seems to matter. Everything we do is done in vain.

I will repeat this difficult summary of this book, again, because it seems our author needs to beat us up with this bleak conclusion.

Whether you are a wise man or a fool, ...an animal, or a man, (women are sadly but not surprisingly never discussed) "this preacher narrator of ours," tells us and again, in repeating poetic ways that what you do doesn't last.

It is important to know that this little book is not written from the perspective of a serf or slave who never tasted the Good life, but with all the hand-wringing wisdom of someone who has had it all, and realizes the hard truth you can't take it with you. Worse, you can't even ensure it will matter when your gone.

Try to leave something behind, says the wise, rich, powerful author, and we are coldly assured that it will likely be squandered by your kids, or whoever follows.

What made this text so hard was its unrelenting tone. Try to think your way to happiness by getting smart, and the author of this short little dark part of the bible tells us, and you will find an awareness that feels like misery to be your reward.

In light of everything “under the sun” being, “vanity” (a phrase and a word that we hear over and over throughout the book), our philosopher suggests that we should just enjoy ourselves. In summary Ecclesiastes says, things are the way they are by God’s intention and thus we should “eat drink and be merry.”

As my cousin suggested in her question about just the passage we hear in the song, when you read Ecclesiastes you, or at least I almost want to re-look at the cover, to see if you’re really reading the **bible**.

If you don’t believe that the bible can be so straight forwardly morose, and even sound hedonistic, try this passage in Ecclesiastes about the value of work on for size.

So, I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it.” don’t read this (Ecclesiastes 2:19-20)

Or this little ditty about our eternal fate...

“For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.” don’t read this (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)

Or this little bit of the books verbal sunshine...

And I thought the dead who were already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive: but better than both (those) is he who has not yet ever been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4: 2-3)

After some meandering, Solomon comes back to his basic bit of advice that we should just do what we do, enjoy what we are engaged in, and follow God’s commandments.

That is Ecclesiastes message. For those who know a little about the Bible, should not be surprised that Ecclesiastes is not far from Job.

In both those books is a strong strain of the sentiment, you’re not God, and the answers are not available to us.

So even if Ecclesiastes is most famous now for having provided Pete Seeger time tested poetry about the seasons of our lives to stick in a folk song.

and unknowingly handed Hemingway the title to his classic “The Sun Also Rises”

Ecclesiastes message might even be better concisely summarized by these dark common phrases that have become a part of common English parlance.

"there is nothing new under the sun"

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," and

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,"

But if Ecclesiastes is bleak, even to a lazy forgetful bible scholar like me. A person who has mostly come to see the bible as confusing, where it is not plain wrong, It is a very fair question to ask why of all the biblical passages to look at, I am sharing this with you.

I am sharing it with you because I think Ecclesiastes is hard one wisdom. And, I guess I have a faith that you are strong enough, and that this is a place that I can be honest enough to as our principals ask us to, to pursue truth.

I hope I am not wrong. I really don't care to depress you.

I am sharing it with you because I believe this painful awareness, even this worthy depression can be a stage in growth.

Some religions offer the promise that if you get religion right, all your other problems will go away, ours does not. We UU's don't agree with much, but we do generally share the feeling that even if you live well, and get more good luck than bad, life is still going to hurt.

Ecclesiastes provides just the kind of wisdom that you have to go through if you are to move from a dreamy spirituality, to an accurate one.

Ecclesiastes is the bible's kiln, of sorts.

And one of the truths of this life, for those who can face it is that at least in this life, we all lose it all.

Sufficiently depressed, good I think the message really has too wear on you, for it to work. For it to work, it has to break you.

If the classic physical expression of deep reflection is Rodin's thinker. (gesture your hand on chin),

and the iconic image of the anomie of the individual lost in the modern world is Edward Munch's The Scream (show the image of the scream)

I think Ecclesiastes physical expression would be either (a head down in your hands) or (a resigned, despondent hands out exasperation)

I want everyone to try it.

Embody this feeling for a bit. I know you have been there (pause for 15 seconds)

Now knowing that that is a very real, universal human experience, remember that that is only one aspect of life.

There is an old catchy Taoist saying,
Find me the person who has no more use for words.
I'd like to have a word with them.

Well, don't we all want to hear what the person who has had all that you can have in this life, from power to wisdom, to fame, and see what in the end they think is important.
I do.

We get that in Ecclesiastes...

Reading Ecclesiastes, helps us fast forward life to gain the very perspective of someone who as in Jim Carrey's opening quote, speaks with the hard-won wisdom about just how fleeting and in the end unsatisfying having everything we have ever wanted can be.

Given that "the preacher" "the Ekkleskia" comes to this truth having had a good life with all the privileges, his journey is not unlike the prince who eventually becomes the Buddha.

And like the Buddha, "the Ekkleskia" tells us you have to give up. Let go. Cope with your impermanence.

The implications of this are powerful. If everything in life is like breath—if it truly is impermanent then, unless we unconditionally acknowledge and accept this fact about life, we are likely to find ourselves pretending to live. Or worse stopped in our tracks when we get to this place.

Head in hands is only one part of life.

The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it this way:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has long ago approved of what do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with you might.

In other words, Ecclesiastes tells us that our job is not to figure it all out, but to live.

Live each moment given to you.

If life is transient, or as an even closer translation of the Hebrew word vanity is that everything is vapor or breath, I think the moral message whether Solomon got it or not is really this, "Don't get hooked on your impermanence.

In Buddhist terms, embrace your impermanence, know you are part of something grand, and breathe into what you are here, now.

And is this not with your modern mind one of life's chief lessons.

What if we were to not compromise that point, and just hold it. Hold the trials and loss and fleeting nature that life is. For certainly that is a part of life.

Sure, life partially sucks, but that is not all life is. If life were only fleeting, unreliable, unjust, and risky it might not be worth living, but it's not just that, is it.

If we read in Ecclesiastes and Job like it that your goodness can be whimsically challenged by fate, and without notice all that you have worked to accumulate in this life can go, and worse, ... will go, might it simply be that the Bible, not unlike us, has many moods to it, and existential despair is certainly one of them....

For me, if Ecclesiastes really does its job, it helps you feel the injustice and unfairness of life so deeply that you realize that it is not only bad and brings you around to feel the wonder of life.

I think Ecclesiastes asks us to ride our discontent all the way to acceptance, and perhaps to the deep truth of God.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is right.

It is simple. Nothing we do lasts forever in a way that we generally find meaningful. Everything passes and changes, with most of us not doing anything famous enough to be forever recorded in history.

I think we need to grieve that.

I think religion should read the bible and claim the truth that is in it.

Ashes to ashes, all is vanity, all will pass.

And there is another truth, whatever it is that we existentially face in this life.

Whatever it is or is not.

We have to pick up our imperfect selves

Dust our imperfect selves off and put one foot in front of another, because if we are going to listen to Solomon when he reflects about the passing vanity or transience of all that there is, we also should listen to him when he speaks in

Proverbs about the character building and focus that is required to live well, to be of use, and about how in Job we realize that we are not in charge.

That the grandeur of life is above and bigger than us, God or no God.

If it didn't matter what we did, or thought, or how we lived because in the end it was all fleeting, I don't think we would have the warm feeling I suspect you do for the power of the monk in our children's message character.

His capacity to cope with his theft and live out of a generosity that is touching. Taps something deeper than nihilism, doesn't it?

I went to see a modern psychic shaman type guy one time, a person who claims to having been hit by lightning, ...twice, among all the hokey and wise things he said, he said that we can only get love right when we are in the human form. What do you mean I asked him?

He said (and I paraphrase here) In our many lives our soul takes on many forms, our souls evolve and work through lots of things in different forms, but we really only when we are in the human form can work on love and matters of the heart.

I don't know if I believe all of that past lives and shifting forms things that he was saying, but

Remembering this I went back and re-read Ecclesiastes, and you know, its author, who is so blazingly, refreshingly cynical about all the things we might work on or take seriously, either intentionally or inadvertently never talks about the cultivation of our love or of our character being a waste

I love that. You might not be able to secure love, or hold it, but it is interesting to me that the wise preacher never eliminates love as pointless, just because like all things, it can be fleeting.

Just after winning her seat in the House, newly minted Rep. Rashida Tlaib said that she wanted to have this moment forever.

And you know what, she can't. And, certainly when we explore the full emotions of all that goes into those experiences is a bitter-sweetness that this too shall pass. However, even if that is sad, that doesn't take away all its value. Make it pointless.

Just because something doesn't last does not mean that it is not valuable.

Ecclesiastes bears raw the inherent temporary nature of our work, the at times plaguing truth that wisdom can bring, but one area he does not attack is the heart. He does not dare touch the deepest emotions we can feel.

We feel that in the Zen master don't we, he has basically nothing left, but he has so much love, that he is sad that he cannot give the robber the moon.

Pregnant Pause

Solomon or whoever wrote Proverbs is right. The way to happiness in this life is by living righteousness, be decent work hard and it generally will pay off.

Solomon or whoever wrote Job is right too. All can be taken away from us, and there is no guarantee that our character will preserve us from bad circumstances, and

Solomon or whoever wrote Ecclesiastes was right too, to remind us that all you do will go, and that you can't take it with you,

but even in our grieving for all that we can and will lose all of those books assure us, that despite all of that, we are a part of something so much grandeur than “we” are.

Growing old, as my Father reminds us wise, is not for sissy’s.

And the truth is that this life is not for the faint of heart.

We need to grieve the illusion that all is eternal because we want it to be.

We need as a people, and as a species to get real with that so we can build a theology, and worldview that prepares us for what we really face.

Life is not good or bad,

it is magical and filled with impermanence. Amen