

Pentecost 11C
Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14; 2:18-23
July 31, 2016

Blessings in a Dead End World

There are only two times we read from the Book of Ecclesiastes in our lectionary cycle – this day and on New Year’s Day. The New Year’s Day reading is more familiar: “To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” As the child of hippie activist types, I often heard Pete Seeger singing those words in his version of the passage with an antiwar twist, *Turn, Turn, Turn*.

Sometimes people like to choose that reading at funerals because of its reminder that there is a time for everything, even dying. And so, with repeated listening, in these circumstances, the Book of Ecclesiastes can seem like comforting, beautiful poetry.

But reading it in context, especially what we hear this morning is anything but comforting, unless you find abject nihilism comforting. “All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.” (Ecc. 1:8)

Ecclesiastes is book in the Wisdom tradition of writing. It along with the Book of Job, Psalms, the Song of Songs, and the Book of Proverbs are wisdom books in the Bible. Though they might differ in genre from one another, they are all concerned with insight into nature and reality. I remember years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor telling me that the reason she loved the Bible is that it had so many different fingerprints on it; it doesn’t represent one way of looking at the world, but many. The Bible itself is a dialectic.

And, indeed, the Book of Ecclesiastes, like the Book of Job, interrogates established wisdom. In Job, the idea is to interrogate and reveal as a sham, the conception of divine justice.

Ecclesiastes is also concerned about justice, but only as one of many human projects that result in nothing. Vanity, the writer says again and again. It is all vanity. The word translated as vanity, “hebel”, is famously difficult to translate into English, perhaps “vapor” is closer. Something insubstantial and ephemeral. The human projects of wisdom, money accumulation, love, power, what have you, all turn into only so much smoke and vapor. Even that lovely poem that Pete Seeger turned into a song is just a way of saying the same things happen again and again and you don’t have any control over them anyhow.

Nothing new happens. The sun goes up and down and the world turns and it’s all the same. You think you have a new idea? Someone else has already thought of it. You think you’ve seen the last of something? Stick around, it’ll cycle back through.

Let’s say you want to get rich. You’ll just end up leaving it to heirs who probably won’t do anything useful with it and you’ll be just as dead as the poor man who could never make a dime. Is it wisdom or knowledge you’re after? Your fancy degrees will not prevent you from dying just like an idiot and all you learned will disappear with you. Perhaps you take comfort in doing the right thing and being good to others. Don’t expect fate to treat you any better than the wicked person. In fact, don’t be surprised if the wicked person ends up better off than you do – not because wickedness pays, of course, but because that’s how life goes. God probably does have some sort of plan, the author thinks, but damned if any of us can make sense of it.

Dark stuff, no doubt. Those of us who have grappled with depression know what the writer is talking about. The monotony of days, the next one much like the day before. All of our busyness and chatter, the endless distractions of everything we fill our lives with - smartphones and yoga and birthday parties and vacations and emails and sports and politics and Netflix – are

just a cover to drown out the truth that all of our hoping and wanting and yearning is only so much vapor. The human predicament is miserable. Even those of us who have not fallen into the grips of serious depression, the kind that gnaws at your capacity for joy and even sorrow, have probably felt this shadow fall on your hearts at one time or another – the suspicion that it's all for nothing.

The writer of Ecclesiastes faces the dark void of that suspicion, accepts that it might be true, and then somehow feels better.

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going (Ecc. 9:9-10).

If life is such an endless cycle of monotony and horror, why doesn't he advocate mass suicide or at least drink himself to death in a Parisian café – or whatever the Ancient Near East equivalent of that was?

Well, the best interpretation of Ecclesiastes I've ever seen is the movie *Groundhog Day*, Harold Ramis' 1993 romantic comedy starring Bill Murray and Andie McDowell. In it, Bill Murray's character, Phil Connors, repeats February 2 over and over and over again. Whatever he does, the next day resets at 6 am, again on February 2. When he first realizes this, he tries getting money, and women to sleep with him, and punishing the morons around him. But none of it matter. The next day is just the same. He grows weary of the same routine and even his elaborate attempts at suicide just result in him waking up again on February 2. Yes, the movie actually gets really dark.

Eventually, though, Phil accepts his fate. He stops treating every day like a curse. He learns to play the piano, he saves a life, he actually begins to care for the woman he's been pursuing throughout the day. Acceptance and seeking out the good he can do changes him and makes what seems like a curse into a blessing.

Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, begins with an examination of Nietzsche's theory of eternal return – the idea that everything that has happened will happen again ad infinitum. "There is nothing new under the sun." Kundera posits that this life is heavy and burdensome. In contrast, actions that just happen once, are light, weightless. Yet in this lightness renders our life insignificant – makes the lightness unbearable. Treating our lives as endless repetition – the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth gives our light, airy lives significance and meaning.

Jesus is considered a part of the Wisdom tradition in Biblical literature. His sayings are about finding insight into nature and reality. In today's gospel he tells of a parable warning of the foolishness of hoarding riches. Certainly this warning is in line with the traditions of the Hebrew people who considered it an ethical imperative to share with the poor, to care for the needy. But it is more than that. The project of human wealth accumulation is not just an ethical issue; it's more fundamental than that. The project of human wealth accumulation is a dead end – it's meaningless. Blessedness, joy, basic significance in our lives, comes from doing something with that wealth – sharing it, spreading it.

I hear from many of you these days that things are hard. The news is hard to hear. There is endless word of violence and reprisals against violence and politics as usual. Another shooting, another bombing, another stupid thing Donald Trump says. I feel it too. We don't want to escape and hide from the world, but we want relief as well.

I have no easy words. Life hurts, the world hurts, and if you don't see it, you're not paying attention. The wisdom Ecclesiastes world weary writer passes to us is acceptance. Accept the world we

are given – broken, hurting, unfair, capricious – accept it. Bear the weight of this heavy world and accept the blessings that will come.