

**PENTECOST 4 - JUNE 25, 2023**  
**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 3:1-17**

The book of Ecclesiastes is considered “sceptical” Wisdom or “dissenting” Wisdom. The author of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher, is a sage who has lived long and has grown weary of life’s fluctuations. Death makes fools even of the wise. What does it matter how hard one works if after death one’s name is forgotten and one’s riches are given to someone else? All is *hevel*. The refrain runs throughout the book 25 times. Though traditionally translated “vanity,” *hevel* is better translated “absurdity, meaninglessness, or vapour.”

If life is nothing but meaninglessness, why have faith? Not every act of goodness is rewarded; evil sometimes goes unpunished. There is the temptation to become indifferent to God, to give up on the world, and to live selfishly. After all, it is easier to live for the day and leave the consequences until tomorrow.

This ancient teacher of wisdom was called *Qohelet* in Hebrew. In Greek the name translates to “Ecclesiastes.” This wise person understood time quite differently from the way it is understood today. He wrote after the Babylonian Exile, an experience that had taught the Hebrew people that human experience was never going to be an uninterrupted walk in the park, and that time should not be a tyrant that demanded all our allegiance.

Some see Ecclesiastes, the wise teacher, as the ultimate cynic. There may be some truth to that. Thirty-eight times throughout the book Ecclesiastes says, “All is vanity” or “absurdity.” Perhaps he is more of a realist than a cynic, a practical theologian who refused to look at life through rose-coloured glasses and wanted those to whom he spoke not to wear rose-coloured glasses themselves.

Qohelet was probably a teacher in a wisdom school. The book is a compendium of his teachings, not recorded in orderly literary fashion with one idea leading logically to the next, but rather as a compilation of the teacher's speculations on the emptiness of life. The intellectual

struggle with orthodox theology was over for him. The question now was, "How does one live without theological or ultimate answers?"

So, Qohelet's basic premise is that life is meaningless. Man's struggle to achieve a name, reputation, fame, fortune, pleasures, and even to acquire wisdom, is meaningless, ultimately counting for nothing. Nature is cyclic, season follows season and pattern follows pattern. There is no meaning to the cycle. Humans can do nothing to change it; they can only conform to it. To make his point, Qohelet posed as Solomon, who, as king, was in a position to explore in depth the various ways by which people sought to give meaning to their life.

The search for wisdom produced frustration; indulgence in pleasures and the acquisition of possessions was hollow. Qohelet learned that humanity is powerless before the cosmic order. There are predetermined times for everything and humans can do nothing but yield to these. Ultimately, all creatures, great and small, wise and foolish, animal and human, share a common end and are made equal in the grave. What happens at death cannot be known.

Martin Luther writes of the misplaced desire that Ecclesiastes seeks to address: "What is being condemned in this book, therefore, is not the creatures [i.e. the things God has created] but the depraved affection and desire of us men, who are not content with the creatures of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate riches, honours, glory, and fame, as though we were going to live here forever; and meanwhile we become bored with the things that are present and continually yearn for other things, and then still others."

Luther's description fits our society as much or more than that of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Ecclesiastes seeks to address such soul-sickness with a reality check: We are going to die. Such knowledge, however, should lead not to despair but to humility and to delight in the gifts of God, even though we know they (and we) won't last forever.

Ecclesiastes catalogues the various seasons of life, 28 of them arranged

in sharp contrast to one another and yet each an undeniable part of human existence. This list begins with what is most fundamentally true – that one day, we are born into this world, then, just as inevitably, our life in this world comes to an end. The French composer Hector Berlioz once remarked, "Time is a great teacher. Unfortunately, it kills all its pupils." Qohelet or Ecclesiastes, would've agreed, though he might have objected to the adverb "unfortunately."

For him, things are the way they are, set in motion by God. The universe unfolds according to its own inner logic and set of seasons. Only God knows why existence is set up the way it is. In the face of an inscrutable world created by an inscrutable God, one should not waste energy railing against life; instead, Qohelet advises, "The best thing to do is to be happy and enjoy yourself for as long as you can."

That is theological advice at its practical best. And yet, the Teacher is not a nihilist. Like the author of Proverbs, he recognizes a certain reliable order that God has put in creation, a time and a season for everything. And the Teacher advocates humility, which is closely related to the fear or awe of the Lord. We are to recognize our own mortality in the face of God's eternity and be appropriately chastened: "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him."

Since there are so many things over which we have no control, it is wise to be happy and to look for joy, to enjoy the gifts God gives. God is the creator of time. God sets the rhythm of reality – the time to mourn, the time to dance, the time to gather in and the time to let go. As Matthew writes in his Gospel: "So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need."

The knowledge that life is *hevel* (fleeting, ephemeral, meaningless) should lead us neither to asceticism nor to licentiousness. It should lead,

instead, to humility and to a proper delight in the gifts of God. But such humility and delight are sometimes hard to come by in human nature. Knowing what time it is differentiates the foolish from the wise. Some hold on for dear life to that which is actually finished and done. Some refuse to let go of a relationship that has ceased to be nourishing. Others try to breathe life into, perhaps, a church program that has been around for too long, but no one is brave enough to bury.

There is a time to build up and a time to break down, a time to be born and a time to die. Though the wisdom writer maintains there will be hatred and war in this world, don't think for a minute that he is condoning either. He is simply stating the fact. Let us not forget that Christ came into a world teeming with hatred and war, with injury and mourning. He came to show us the way to higher ground, giving us directions to the peaceable kingdom, which God originally intended and which he has come to restore.

"The kingdom of God is at hand," Jesus announces. He came to defeat all that would separate us from God and from one another. Any time we sanction hatred in God's name, we are doing so in a way that is entirely opposite to our faith tradition. It's hard not to notice some of the hateful rhetoric that permeates the public conversation in the world today. Let us never sigh and say, "Well, that's just the way things are." If there ever were a time to kill, now is the time to kill incivility and replace it with civility. If there ever were a time to sow seeds of reason, the time is now. We need to know what time it is.

One day the Dalai Lama and an Indian psychoanalyst held a public dialogue on the subject of hatred. The psychoanalyst said that a healthy person should be able to hate and then to transcend hating. The Dalai Lama said that was not the Buddhist view. He told the story of a man who had been imprisoned in Tibet and tortured by the Chinese. After he was released, the man told the Dalai Lama that on two occasions, things had gotten really terrible in prison. Had he been close to death, the Dalai Lama asked. "No," the man responded. "Twice, I almost hated the Chinese."

Jesus said, "Love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you." This is the time, now is the time in our society, not to answer evil with evil, ugliness with ugliness. This is the time for the reconciling love of God to be released into the atmosphere afresh through you and me. It is a time not to postpone joy, but to embrace it.

"Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your *hevel* life, that are given to you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun."

However, Ecclesiastes does not contain the fullness of the Gospel. He has no concept of resurrection. Nevertheless, he addresses the kind of misplaced desire that permeates human society, describing the good life, and calling us to a proper humility. Ecclesiastes saw a certain futility in life and the temptation to give up. When he wrote this book of wisdom, he lived in a changeless world. The environment, culture, and everyday lifestyles remained the same from generation to generation. Nothing people could do, he reasoned, would change the world for the better.

Why would the teacher of wisdom write such a depressing essay on life? To challenge the reader to a deeper spiritual quest. People will never be able to completely master the world, to explain the mysteries of life, to justify their own existence. So, people have a choice: to become selfish and cynical, or to reach out to God. When someone turns to God, they do not turn their back on the world; they just look at the world with new eyes and trust in a greater power who is master of the world, who can explain the mysteries of life, who can justify their existence. Through God's eyes, believers understand that life does have meaning, life does have a purpose.

Unlike the teacher, we live in a world of constant change and choice. But we are faced with the same questions. Aren't all these choices and changes shallow ones? Isn't life ultimately meaningless? In the temptation to give up, we are faced with another choice, a radical choice

for real meaning, for ultimate purpose, for God.

Ecclesiastes does not pretend to preach the Gospel. Rather, he encourages the reader to a God-centred world view rather than falling victim to frustrations and unanswered questions. None of the contents have to be rejected in the light of the NT. Although the NT revelation is vastly greater than that in Ecclesiastes, the two are not devoid of similarities. Like the people of God in Solomon's time, believers today are subject to the unexpected changes and chances common to humanity. Yet they know that God works through every fluctuation of life. Respecting the future, which for Solomon was shrouded in a shadow land, Christians have the glorious hope of being in the presence of Christ himself.

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, he said, "The time is now fulfilled." When we hear that proclamation today, **another** "now" is created: Now is the moment of our salvation – this very moment, rich with divine possibility. Here we are on the frontier between the old order and the new order, where Jesus reigns. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Barth called his age the time of "great positive possibility." That is equally true today in the twenty-first century. Today is filled, overflowing, with great divine possibility. No, the past is not completely finished and gone, but the very real new has come, and is here now.

Jesus knew all there was to know about time. He knew when his time had come to give his life. He knew whom to trust with his life, with his own coming and going.

The wisdom of the ages: "For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." A Sanskrit poem written 2,000 years ago summarizes it well: "Listen to the salutation of the dawn... Look to this day, for it is the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and truth of existence: the joy of growth, the splendour of action, the glory of power. For yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow a vision, but today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope."

**Amen.**

PRAYERS FOR 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF PENTECOST  
JUNE 25, 2023

God our motherly Father, our brotherly Saviour, our sisterly Spirit-Friend, we ask that in our prayers and in the ordinary affairs of each day, we may exhibit your generous spirit to other people.

We pray for the millions of homeless people whom we will never meet but whose predicament we see in news reports. Please bless those humanitarian agencies who attempt to care for them, and all who give generously to support their work.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for unwanted or destitute people in our own country, from the Atlantic, to the Arctic, to the Pacific. Please give both wisdom and a generous spirit to Federal and Provincial Governments, and strengthen the welfare ministry of churches.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for any among us here today, who with dignity and courage are secretly enduring misfortunes or ongoing worries. Please give your peace and healing to them, and keep us sensitive, that we may recognise a cry for help if it comes our way and respond generously.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for all the bewildered, lost souls: for young people heading out, puzzled adults who find that neither career nor family satisfy their deepest need. Please gather the lost into your loving arms, and help each of us to treat awkward, prickly people with the generous respect that you have for each.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

Remembering how Jesus, Mary and Joseph fled for their lives and became refugees, we give thanks for those who, despite terrible strain and difficulties, continue welcoming the homeless, stateless and refugees. Strengthen those fleeing from danger and violence or from economic deprivation and the lack of basic clean water and sanitation. When we take going to our place of worship for granted, remind us that for so many, it could cost them their lives. Lord, help us to be

compassionate and caring for the vulnerable and weak. Grow us to be passionate about tackling the issues which force so many to flee their homes.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for reconciliation with our Indigenous siblings. Inspire us as we try to bring genuine, loving reconciliation to our relationship.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for all the ELCIC delegates as they prepare for Assembly 2023 and the Anglican Church in Canada as they hold their General Synod at the same time. Guide them in their service and leadership in your church as they share worship, workshops and Bible Studies.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for all who are hurting, are lonely, homeless, abandoned or feeling unloved; all who are suffering, from any illness; emotional, mental, or physical ... Surround them with your love as well as the love and support of family and neighbour.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

We pray for our Bishop asking for healing for Bishop Kathy who is recovering after a car accident. May her recovery be quick. We pray for pastors, deacons, and lay leaders. Energize them and guide their service to the church, neighbours, and all who cross their path.

Compassionate God, **we pray for your world.**

Loving Saviour, seeking the lost and the unlovely, we worship you.

Caring Spirit, enabling the weak and the meek, we worship you.

Holy God, generous beyond all calculation, we worship you.

**Amen!**

God in Community, Holy One, hear us as we pray:

**Our Father ...**