

All the world's a stage. A sermon from a series on Ecclesiastes, preached on February 19, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, B.C. by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: ECCLESIASTES 12:1-8
I CORINTHIANS 15:50-58

Lots of humorous stories circulating that people of more mature years either tell about themselves or others tell about them.

For example,

Just before a funeral service, a young minister came up to the very elderly widow and asked if everything was in order and whether she was okay. "Yes," said the widow, "He lived a good life – he was 98, just a few years older than me".

The young minister hesitant to ask the age of the widow must have conveyed by his look that he wanted to ask the question but felt embarrassed to do so.

"I'm 96 dear".

Then she paused and with a small smile and a twinkle in her eyes, added "Hardly worth going home is it?"

A reporter of a local newspaper was sent out to interview a lady who had just turned 104.

The reporter began his interview with the question – what you think is the best thing about being a 104.

She thought only for a few seconds – then replied “NO PEER PRESSURE”

Just to be gender balanced.

One evening an elderly couple had dinner at another couple’s home

After the meal, the wives left the table and went into the kitchen to prepare for the dessert and tea.

The two gentlemen were talking and one said, “Last night, we went out to a new restaurant and it was really great. I would recommend it highly.”

The other man asked, “What is the name of the restaurant”

The first man thinks and finally asks, “What is the name of that flower you give to someone you love? You know. It is red and has thorns”.

“Do you mean a rose?”

“Yes, that is the one,” replied the man. He then turned towards the kitchen and called out, “Rose, what’s the name of that restaurant we went to last night?”

It is not my intent to embarrass, put down or make fun of the more mature in years

I began my ministry in a large church in Southern Ontario and part of the work of that church’s assistant minister was to have oversight and do

pastoral care for roughly 250 seniors – over 70+ in 1980

Those seniors taught me lessons that I have carried my entire ministry and still use.

Over the years as I have listened to those of more mature years, there are some common concerns and fears about which they are troubled. The number #1 feeling among the more mature in age is the feeling of uselessness,

Of being a bother,

Such a feeling is particularly common among those whose opinions were once considered important Who were looked upon for leadership and direction – and now no longer.

Then as I have listened, sometimes there emerges the feeling of guilt.

“I have totally fouled up my life”

If I had my life to live over...

Guilt...if only...if only.

Then there is sometimes the feeling combination of bitterness and resentment.

If I had married better,

Or if my children, had been more thoughtful.

Our version of “I could have been great...I could have been a contender (On the Waterfront – Marlon Brando and Rod Steiger)

As we age there can also emerge the feeling of fear – of ill health, running out of money, lingering

death, being left alone, losing one's mental faculties and dozens more.

So, let not the funny stories that began this morning's message make you believe that otherwise than I want to approach this morning's reading from Ecclesiastes with respect and sensitivity.

Sensitivity – because what the Preacher outlines in the lesson William read is deadly accurate.

Respect – because some here know all too well the accuracy of the Preacher's words

In The first 8 verses of chapter 12, the Preacher sets before us one of the best allegories or poetic descriptions about the reality of aging.

The words are fair and undeniable are they not?

There is no point in covering your ears and saying la, la, la, la, la

Or skipping over this part of the Bible because you don't want to think about this material now.

If not now – then when?

Let's look briefly at what the Preacher says, but not in a way of too much analysis, less the spirit of the whole be lost

For these words are meant not just for examination and academic and removed consideration,

Rather, for reflection in our lives at any age!

One thing I think needs to be said is that these are words written by a person mature in age, experience, life and God.

These are not the words of a young person, for young people as a whole do not have, nor are they meant to have at a young age, the perspective from which the Preacher writes.

I believe this is the strength and power and sense of timelessness of Ecclesiastes.

The writer is writing from experience – real living and sensitive observation.

His counsel and guidance then can be trusted in learning how to live a life that really matters.

Vs. 2 ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with^[a] the rain;

Description of a dull winter's day.

Think November/December in PG, where the sun sets too early and rises very late.

Light is being withdrawn.

The reminder of aging – the fading of physical and mental powers and the more general losses of old age.

Lights here can refer to one's own senses and faculties

Light here can also refer to old friends that are taken,

Familiar customs changing
 Long held hopes now have to be abandoned

³ in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; ⁴ when the doors on the street are shut,

The image changes from meteorological to a great house in decline.

Its former glories of power, style, liveliness and hospitality are now lengthening shadows of what they once were.

... and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; ⁵ when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along^[a] and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; ⁶ before the silver cord is snapped,^[b] and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷ and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath^[c] returns to God who gave it.

Metaphors on aging.

The decline of hearing. Unsteadiness on one's feet, Moving a little slower. Graying of hair, a grasshopper is a creature of lightness and agility – now slowed down to a laborious crawl.

The image of a funeral procession

The fragility of the human frame and how quickly it can be broken

Life being ultimately not at our command.

Then with verse 8 – back to the initial cry of the book **Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.**

Nothing under the sun –the vertical – is ours to keep.

What a Dougie Downer we may conclude about the Preacher!!

Realistic though his words may be, do we really need to hear them this morning?

Is this how you are going to end the series on Ecclesiastes?

If so, it is no wonder Katharine said not 12 weeks on Ecclesiastes please Herb

And you may also be thinking, I was feeling great this morning when I came into church I'm not so sure anymore!

Remember a couple of weeks ago I said that as the Preacher sets down his thoughts and reflections on how to live a life that matters, He is building a case.

He is lifting up all those things which we might see as important to happiness in this life and saying – I think not!

Wealth? Power? Control?

Education? Status? --in and of themselves will not bring satisfaction in this life.

In and of themselves they will not offer us a life that matters,

For they are of this world – the horizontal.

There must be says Ecclesiastes – the vertical.

God is the One who gives meaning and purpose in this life.

We will see come back to this next week as we consider the final verses of the book – the horizontal!

Before the allegory on aging (vs.2-18) the Preacher calls his readers to do what?

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”;

What IS the preacher saying to his readers then and now?

God has designed each of us to be empty without him.

To remember in verse 1 is not a purely mental act. It is not one of those think good things and positive thoughts.

It is to drop what pretenses or assumptions we have about self-sufficiency and commit ourselves to God. There can be no half measures!

Early in this series on Ecclesiastes, I cited St. Augustine, 4th c. Bishop of Hippo words from his classic Confessions.

I repeat it again and I shall repeat it on a regular basis – for it is so basic to our relationship with God
You [God] have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.

There is no plan B in building a life that matters!

Remember your creator in the days of your youth.

You cannot start any sooner to life for God,
 To develop a trust in and obedience to Him.
 To see Him as centre of the whole of your life

Those of us who have young children, or work with children and young people know that young kids are more open,

More receptive,

More curious,

More easily attuned to awe, and wonder in this world.

Learning a language is easier when you begin early,

As is playing any musical instrument.

Sure there is work and effort involved, but it seems such things come easier to us when we are younger.

What Katharine has been doing with the Young Worshippers barely scratches the surface of Bible memory work

But it is a starting point.

To have verses, passage of scripture in our heads,
Or words and phrases of hymns and spiritual songs
are not simply to impress.

Rather, such can and does help give us
perspective, meaning, hope when such things are
needed – **before the days of trouble come** – And
come they will!

Good counsel here as Ecclesiastes begins his
final chapter.

All of us, each of us are getting older.

Certainly, more of us are living longer than our
grandparents.

But if we are not trying to live a life that matters – a
life centred on God – then as we age, no matter
what we “have” – the stuff of this world – we will
never be content.

Without God as Centre in the whole of our lives –
something will remain missing. AMEN