

Life: A Gift. The first in a series of sermons on Ecclesiastes. Sunday January 8, 2017, St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC preached by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: ECCLESIASTES 1:1-15

PHILIPPIANS 3:3-11

MARK 8: 34-38

In the summer before I turned 40, I did two important things that I continue to carry with me. The first was the skill to tie a bow tie.

The second was to find and read this book, When all you've ever Wanted Isn't Enough. The Search for a Life that Matters

The author is Rabbi Harold Kushner whose first book, When Bad things happen to Good People. Had been on the best seller lists for weeks after it was first published in 1981.

It was a book written in the aftermath of his son Aaron's death from leukemia.

The success of tying a bow tie was a bucket list check off.

The Kushner book remains for me personally one of the most significant books I have ever read.

My Dad had died two years before its publication and Ruth was moving toward being 2

So excited was I about what Kushner was saying,
that that fall, I talked the book up at St. Andrew's,
Sackville and St. James. Port Elgin NB

And made several copies available for each
congregation to borrow.

Some who read it said, yes, good read

However when most of the people found it was a
running commentary of reflections and
observations about the Old Testament book of
Ecclesiastes – most said no thank you!

The book is too gloomy and cynical

“Herb, did you not have a good holiday?

Why would you read then then invite me to read
about what for the most part seems all gloom and
world weariness?”

Why indeed?

When I told Katharine last fall that I was
considering preaching from Ecclesiastes from
January 8th until Holy Week – 12 weeks,

Her first response was akin to the first reactions of
many to my encouraging them to read Kushner's
book

“Herb, it's too gloomy – it's the bleak mid-winter
Give St. Giles a break.”

I listened and made a decision

I would not preach for 12 weeks on Ecclesiastes – I
would only preach on Ecclesiastes until Lent – 7
weeks.

Before we look and reflect upon the verses that Joan read this morning,
Some general comments.

First, there is no doubt that this is a hard book to like – or at least it is an easy book to find reasons to ignore.

The ancient rabbis debated whether the book should even be included in the canon on Hebrew scripture.

Although the book eventually cleared that hurdle, it is a book that is seldom read during public worship.

As for preaching from it – more often than not, it is the words of chapter 3

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

**² a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
what is planted;**

That remain often the only things from Ecclesiastes that are preached upon.

Second, Ecclesiastes is a messy mixture of autobiographical references,

Theological reflections,

Philosophical musings and proverbial instructions

Therefore, there is no one 'style'.

Third,

This book asks of its readers no nonsense questions.

Once heard, one cannot just pass them off
 Questions about wealth, possessions, honour,
 pleasure and knowledge.

How do we live a life that really matters?

For is that not what all of us want – to live a life
 with purpose and meaning – whatever our
 chronological age.

Does life mean anything?

Is there anything beyond the daily grind?

To the opening verses of Ecclesiastes then.

One of the first things that stand out is the
 perspective from which Ecclesiastes writes

It is a perspective that is exclusively horizontal

Under the sun (Vs. 13) – phrase is used 30 times in
 the 12 chapters of the book.

The author wants us as his readers to remember –
 ‘I am writing from this viewpoint – a viewpoint
 bounded by the horizons of this world.

This is a viewpoint in which God has no place or if
 he does,

It is as an afterthought,

Window dressing only.

A perspective widely held today by the way.

Today, many people may not necessarily be anti-
 God and his promises.

It is just that they do not figure God and his promises into their everyday lives and actions.

Ecclesiastes therefore is saying, within that horizontal only perspective only, then yes, life is all vanity.

Nothing in the end matters

Now,

If we persist in hearing Ecclesiastes out, we know that he is convinced and convicted there is much more to life than endless and cyclic actions and behavior.

There is purpose and meaning to each life

But Ecclesiastes is building a case.

He is in no hurry to answer ultimate questions.

Rather, he wants us to look very clearly at the world we can see and at the answers it seems to give, BEFORE he will do more than drop hints drawn from his own experience and observations.

Another thing that emerges from these opening verses of this some would say, most troubling book is that *Ecclesiastes invites us to look around and consider not easy to change realities in this world 'under the sun'.*

I wonder, do any of us ever feel that same sort of monotony.

I wonder do we ever feel that we are chasing the wind

I wonder do we feel as if we are just going through
the motions,

Putting on a brave face, owing to the expectations
others have of us or we have of ourselves?

I wonder, like the sun, the wind and the waters
about which Ecclesiastes speaks, we feel or believe
at times – so many fine beginnings in our life,
doubled back

So many things gained, but how many really
fulfilled.

We look at our lives,

Think about what we have acquired and
accomplished,

We should be content and satisfied, but I wonder
how many people step back for a moment and can
resonate with songstress Peggy Lee's plaintive
cry – *Is this all there is?*

The bulletin cover is an example of a school
of still life painting known as vanitas



It flourished during the period of 1620=1650 and became especially popular with well to do devoutly Protestant citizens of Holland

It was an art form that grew out of a reaction to Roman Catholicism.

In the Dutch case, a revolt against its colonial rule under Catholic Spain.

All the paintings of this particular school convey the message of the passing of earthly life when compared to the permanence of Christian values.

The bulletin cover painting was initially painted in 1625 by Pieter Claeszoon. It is called simply – Vanitas. Still life.

Some of the objects painted have easily seen symbolic meaning.

The Skull to the right of the painting – a universal symbol of death

The lit candle to the left – light in the darkness; the passage of time

The watch in the foreground to the right of the candle – passage of time.

One more for this morning – the walnut – in front of the skull – symbolizing the wood of the Cross upon which Jesus was crucified.

It is not a painting I would rush to hang in my home or here at the office – even though it would certainly provide a great conversation starter.

For In the work to which I have been called and continue to serve, I am all too frequently reminded of the passage of time and the shortness of this earthly life

Nevertheless, it is a most fitting visual aid to complement the opening verses – in fact the whole book of Ecclesiastes – for both the painting and the book detail very clearly some realities from which we cannot run away or ignore.

Heads up Ecclesiastes and Claeszoon's painting is saying – our lives under the sun are transitory.

The opening verses show us that the Preacher or what in Hebrew is known as Qoheleth is going to be posing some basic no nonsense, reflective questions.

Sometimes the questions will be right in front of us.

Sometimes, like this morning's reading, the questions are there, but not stated in so many words.

For example, as I prayerfully and reflectively read the verses in preparation for this morning, I saw in the Preacher's words, a question asked by Jesus to his followers

The question – from Mark's gospel – in the section again Joan read for us this morning.

**For what will it profit them [anyone] to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?
(vs. 36]**

Or again as one hears it in the more meaty King James Version

³⁶ For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Do you not hear that question as you hear the Preacher speak here in these opening verses? If not yet, then hold that question in your minds, for you will presently.

The world in which you and I live sees generations out and goes on forever
Sunrise, sunset, change of seasons, the movement of the winds,

The cyclic natures of rivers-all streams run to the sea (vs.7)

In the light of these observations from nature, our lives are transitory.

The opening verses I think also show that the Preacher is no recluse who has abandoned the world

Setting down thoughts in some removed office or living quarters.

Rather, he is a person who has seen and himself experienced disillusionment and death of others
He has confronted inevitable despair.

He's been where his book is going to take us
I wonder if this is why the initial response to the book is no thank you, too gloomy

I wonder if it is gloomy or too close to the bone that keep many of us away from the book.

I wonder if we are afraid of being found out that we do not know all answers, because we may be asking the wrong questions.

The identity of the Preacher is never set forth in the book.

It has been a long held belief that the Preacher is King Solomon

For King Solomon in the early years of his reign was known for his intellectual insights,
Moral discernment

Almost encyclopedic knowledge of nature and unlimited wealth and power.

Though the Preacher's true identity is secondary to his message and insights.

This is a person who lives in this bewilderingly complex and convoluted world in which you and I live

His words have the authority of personal experience and longevity of life behind them

His overarching concern is to speak up front and personal about goals in our lives,

What we think is important VS what IS important.

He wants to share with us his mistakes and bad choices

In order to help us avoid making the same mistakes and bad choices

In other words,

He is saying just when you think you have all the answers; you will find you don't because you have been asking the wrong questions!

Here then in chapter 1, Ecclesiastes or the Preacher begins to set the stage, to build a case He wants us his readers to look very closely at the world we can see and the answers it seems to gives.

I wonder, what do each of us think after hearing Ecclesiastes or the Preacher's opening words...