

New Seasons

It is a time of overlapping seasons. As fans of the Washington Huskies know full well and sorrowfully, we are in the midst of Bowl Season, the College Football Championship Season. It's basketball season and hockey season (Go, Blues!) and, for most of the world, football season (or, as we call it in the U.S., soccer). Even baseball is in the act with winter leagues in the Caribbean and the Antipodes and the Hot Stove League. It's very definitely the season of winter. It's the season of end-of-year accounting and deductions, of new budgets and new assignments, of new classes for some and prepping for finals for others. Liturgically, there are enough overlapping seasons to make a preacher's head spin. This is the first Sunday after Christmas, day 7 of the Christmas season but because Epiphany is this coming Friday, some churches are marking today with Epiphany readings. I was also reminded as I planned this service that the Revised Common Lectionary has a special set of readings for New Year's Day, something I've never looked into as we've had only one other Sunday New Year's Day together and I'm generally interested in celebrating Christmas until Epiphany.

But this year, I decided to follow those special lectionary readings for one important reason: Ecclesiastes. This little book in the middle of our Christian arrangement of the Old Testament has fascinated me for years. I think I wrote more papers for Old Testament and Hebrew courses in seminary on Ecclesiastes than on any other book. Some years ago, we worked through it in "Soup, Salad, and Soul." But I've never actually preached a sermon from Ecclesiastes, in part because this is one of only two places it appears in the lectionary. So, I thought it was high time...

If you're not familiar with Ecclesiastes, the name of the book is taken from the opening verse: "The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." The word for "Teacher" in the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was popular among early Christians was "Ecclesiastes," based on the original Hebrew "Qoheleth," "the one who calls together the assembly." While the Hebrew word, "Qahal," can be interpreted as "class," leading to the understanding of Qoheleth as Teacher, the Greek "ecclesia" came to have a slightly different meaning in Christian usage: Church. Thus in some translations, the Teacher becomes the Preacher. Preacher or teacher, the author of the book was almost assuredly NOT King Solomon as was traditionally thought. Whether the author referred to himself as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" for literary reasons or whether the phrase was added by later editors to justify the book's inclusion in the canon, we can't know. But the Hebrew of the book and other internal clues point to its composition in the mid-Third century BCE, centuries after the reign of Israel's most illustrious king.

What scholars believe the book to be, then, is the musing of an educator of boys in the relative peace and prosperity of Judah under the reign of the Persian Empire. His vision of the world, "vanity, vanity, all is vanity," is somewhat skeptical, some even say bitter. Proponents of the author's pessimism generally relegate the more positive conclusions scattered throughout the book to a later editor, perhaps the same person who tried to attribute the work to Solomon. But other scholars see the unity of the book – it is possible in faith to be very blunt about life's difficulties and still retain an ultimate hope in the future and a belief in the loving sovereignty of God. I see no difficulty at all in holding both understandings of life in balance in the mind. I have moments when all seems vain but I'm also ready to agree with Qoheleth that the model of life is: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has

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long ago approved what you do. 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 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 your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.” Of course, I have the advantage of Qoheleth in that, like the Pharisees and Jesus, I believe in the resurrection.

The work of Qoheleth is full of marvelous little aphorisms, many of which are great fun to preach and perhaps someday I'll put together a sermon series on some of them. But today's passage is perhaps the most widely-known of all Ecclesiastes. For those of a certain generation, it will always be remembered as John Kennedy's favorite passage, memorialized in the eulogy offered at his funeral by The Most Reverend Philip M. Hannan, at the time, auxiliary bishop of Washington, DC. By the time of Kennedy's funeral, Pete Seeger had already set the passage to the tune we sang earlier, made even more famous by The Byrds and, for those of us in Europe, by the Welsh singer Mary Hopkin.

It's worth considering, what made this passage a favorite to JFK and so many others? Why did Seeger's song, a simple tune applied to these ancient words, become a hit for so many artists? In part, it is the beautiful parallelism of the passage, which is the secret to the memorable nature of so much Biblical Hebrew poetry. The twinned ideas march across the page of our reading or the score of our listening and singing. But the ideas themselves are also important, presenting the polarities of our everyday lives – birth and death, injury and pardon, passion and restraint, creativity and destruction, love and hate, war and peace. In eight verses, it seems, Qoheleth captures the human experience in its multifaceted beauty and then adds the coda to remind us who it was forged the gem of life.

It's a poem that can be read, a song that can be heard, with great pleasure and important meaning for us at any time. But there is a real sense of rightness in lifting up this passage on this particular Sunday, on this day that we mark the beginning of a new year on our calendar. We are almost automatically considering both past and future this morning, looking back and looking forward like the two-faced Roman god Janus for whom the month is named. Many are delighted to rip 2016 out of their calendars as an “annus horribilis,” a year marked by tragedy, death, and disappointment. But we have also seen births and marriages and accomplishments in the past year, sure signs of hope for the future. What sort of year will 2017 be? Some in our country and community are looking forward to a new year with a new political administration as a reward for patience. Some see the promise of financial plans come to fruition. Some await more births or marriages or graduations. But some are fearful of what the new year will bring – financial uncertainty, political disenfranchisement, the winding down of beloved lives. In 2017, we will see many of the seasons that Qoheleth calls out, either as individuals or collectively, just as we did in 2016.

I see the push and pull of Qoheleth's opposing seasons as I look back on 2016 and forward to 2017. The honor of being selected by my peers as President of the Lynnwood City Council was certainly accompanied by the stress that goes along with that position in a polarized political environment as well as by the feeling of accomplishment as the Council and the City took important actions and began important initiatives, such as the Taskforce on Police Relations with

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Communities of Color. I look forward to setting presidential duties aside in 2017 but I know that, in a municipal election year, there will still be plenty of stress in navigating the shifting currents of alliances and oppositions. We had a nearly unprecedentedly strong financial year at Good Shepherd Baptist in 2016, which, along with the generosity of Faith Fellowship Church, allowed us a major renovation of our Sanctuary. In 2017, we'll take up difficult questions for our future, including completing our strategic planning process and deciding whether to enter into an exciting experiment in alternative housing for homeless students. Nothing is purely pain; nothing is purely healing, nor shall it ever be. There is a time to mourn and a time to dance.

One couplet in particular stands out for me this morning, however, as I contemplate life in 2017: "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." For months, the political rhetoric in our country has been almost deafeningly loud. As the political process ground on last year, month after weary month, we were treated to a whole host of speeches – some benign, some vicious, some ludicrous. As the candidates fell by the wayside, it seemed that the language of the remaining campaigns grew more and more heated, more and more widely separated in concept if not in temperature. Since the election has been accomplished, we have heard calls for continued verbal and political warfare, pleas for calm and reason, and chuckled reminders that "they never do what they say they will do anyway." Part of me longs for 2017 as a time to keep silence.

But I am also aware of the real concern of many of our neighbors over key planks of the President-Elect's platform in their xenophobia, misogyny, and disregard for the vitality of the environment. I have been horrified at the actions of members of the majority party as they withdrew voting rights from vulnerable minorities and cozied up to avowed White Supremacists. I am truly alarmed as the transition team has assembled a group of new leaders for our nation who proclaim that they will undo decades of progress on all sorts of fronts, even as time and influence with the new administration are auctioned off to the highest bidder. And while I am willing to hold my tongue to a certain extent until the proof is made sure in the pudding, my common sense tells me that this coming year is going to be a time when all persons of good will are called upon to speak for the common good.

But even as I prepare to speak out, when necessary, I am reminded that none of us can see the full picture of what God has in store. As Qoheleth wrote, God "has put a sense of past and future into (our) minds, yet (we) cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." And so, I am preparing to temper my prophetic tongue with mercy, to encourage rather than excoriate, to promote love over hate. Because as beautiful and as meaningful as I find the words of Qoheleth, I must always, as a follower of Jesus, remember to balance them with and interpret them through the words of the Messiah and his apostles. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." We must always remember that the selfishness, brokenness, and even evil in the hearts of our sisters and brothers is not the sum total of their lives, for they too are daughters and sons of our Loving Creator. If they are irredeemable, what is the hope of the Gospel for us? And if we have been called in love to follow the path of life and love, so too may they hear of God's love and their hearts may be changed.

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“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...” How much will we be called upon to speak in the new year and how often will it be better for us to be silent? I don’t know. Who will be born and who will die? I cannot tell. How often will we laugh? How often will we cry? How much will we mourn? How much will we dance? None of us can see very far into the future; perhaps, not at all. But I think Qoheleth got it right: “(God) has made everything suitable for its time; ... there is nothing better for (us) than to be happy and enjoy (ourselves) as long as (we) live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

In the early days of 2000, I saw a remarkable, if somewhat controversial, movie that has lingered in my mind ever since. It was called “American Beauty” and was written by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes. It was the story of a rather sad American family portrayed by the incomparable Kevin Spacey, Annette Benning, and Thora Birch. Critics and film scholars, such as my wife, have pointed to the film’s deep philosophical debt to the work of Qoheleth, particularly in the final monologue by Spacey’s character, Lester Burnham. It goes like this:

“I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn't a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time...

“For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars... And yellow leaves, from the maple trees, that lined my street... Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper... And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird... And Janie... And Janie... And... Carolyn.

“I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me...but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst...

“And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life.

“You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure... but don't worry...You will someday.”

Or, in the words of Ecclesiastes, “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.” For the wisdom of Qoheleth and all who dare to examine God’s beautiful world with their eyes wide open, thanks be to God. Amen.