

SERMON

SECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

“It’s About Time!”

OT: Ecclesiastes 3.1-13

NT: Revelation 21.1-6

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Qohelet, if such a person ever existed, is somewhat of a mystery. The King James Version of the Bible calls this enigmatic figure “the Preacher.” The New Revised Standard Version calls them “the Teacher.” Both of these represent an attempt to render a Hebrew name which you may recognize in its Greek form “Ecclesiastes.” That name identifies both a book of the Bible and, apparently, its author.

The name *Qohelet* seems to derive from the term *qahal* which means to gather people together. Or, it may be that it comes from *qehillah* which means “harangue” or “make argumentative speech.” Perhaps *Qohelet* was a “haranguer”-- a troublemaker. Maybe he or she was like one of the social media gadflies of our day. Whoever *Qohelet* was they present us a worldly skeptical point of view-- a mix of questions, answers, and insights.

Qohelet was a synthesizer of ideas, an instructor and a student of nature, both human and divine. It is almost impossible to read the words written in his or her name and not feel confronted and maybe even perplexed. For as was the case in the time *Qohelet* wrote so it is now; the quips and sayings, queries, poems and proverbs of Ecclesiastes keep us guessing. They prompt us to wonder about who God is, who we are, and what our lives are meant to mean. Not a bad set of questions to ask ourselves as we approach New Year’s Day 2019. The turn of the year lends itself to these kinds of musings. Perhaps this annual reminder of time passing-- of *our* time passing-- prompts us to inventory our attitudes and actions. Some of us expend much effort making mental lists of good and bad times, foolish and wise decisions, prayers answered and dreams deferred.

Even though by now we should know better we still make our resolutions. This year, we say, will be different. This year we will live our lives more fully, sensibly, and well.

Particularly in this season we think of time like a road traveled over the crest of a new hill. It will grant us a new horizon. Or maybe it is like a book. We will turn the page fully expecting to read or write some new adventure. *Qohelet* says time isn’t like either of these things. It doesn’t move in a straight line from the past, through the present, to the future.

The Byrds got it right when they borrowed the words of Ecclesiastes for the lyrics of their classic rock hit of the 60’s. “For everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn.” For all these years Ecclesiastes has been telling us time is a circle

“There is nothing new under the sun,” remember? “A time for birth, a time for death, for planting and harvest... A time for weeping and for laughing, for mourning and for dancing. A time to embrace, a time to refrain. A time for love, and for hate, and for peace and for war.”

In both our private and communal lives these events go ‘round and round and round. They began before we were born. They will continue after we are gone. Resolutions notwithstanding, Ecclesiastes tells us we’re just chasing our existential tails.

That may come as bad news for those of us who had visions of reforming ourselves or the world in the next twelve months. What we build up, time will tear down. What we cast off, time will bear back to us. We cannot vow to get “better and better every day in every way” without conceding that we will also get worse, and better and worse again.

As Christians we don’t like to hear this kind of thinking. It militates against everything we believe. We think of time as a continuum with Creation at the beginning, Christ at the center, and Redemption in the end. Meanwhile we live somewhere in the middle of all of that.

From an orthodox point of view that’s how time works. Yet in the scope of our lives we know that we weren’t there “in the Beginning” and I don’t expect that we will be around “in the End.” As I said, we live somewhere in the middle and like Ecclesiastes we might be excused if it sometimes feels like we are going around in circles.

What should we do about all of this? Ecclesiastes asks that question rhetorically on our behalf. “What gain have the workers from their toil?” I say *rhetorically* because that question is followed immediately by an answer-- or at least an opinion and *then* an answer:

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Now comes the answer: “I know that there is nothing better than for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in their toil.”

Depending on your point of view this last piece of wisdom can either be taken as urging us toward resignation or prompting us toward acceptance. It’s an important saying to consider since it occurs fully seven times in the course of Ecclesiastes.

Contrary to popular belief Isaiah, not Ecclesiastes, is the one who urges us to “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.” *That* to me sounds like resignation. It amounts to a shrug of the shoulders, a sigh and another drink for the road that leads to oblivion. I think Ecclesiastes offers us something better. I think *Qohelet* tries to teach us something different, something about acceptance.

Ecclesiastes teaches us that God makes a time for everything and gives us wisdom for understanding, but that wisdom only goes so far. To paraphrase verse twelve: “God created everything beautiful in its time and planted mystery in the human mind.” Our experiences go ‘round and ‘round and ultimately, we don’t know where they go. We can try to New Year’s resolve that mystery away. Or we just might take opportunities such as this to stand naked before the limits of our understanding and let it all go.

The ancient poet Sophocles wrote: “The immortal Gods alone have neither age nor death! All other things, almighty time disquiets.” Maybe that is why our New Year’s celebrations frequently constitute a strange brew of hedonism and reflection. We feel disquieted and try to drown out the anxiety of eternity with either partying or penitence-- a bender or a hangover. Ecclesiastes tells us “Let Go and Let God.” Everything is in place not *because* of us, but sometimes *in spite* of us. There is nothing wrong with enjoying ourselves while we can. God gives us life as a gift. Although *Qohelet* was a consummate *skeptic* at the same time he or she was a *realist*-- a believer not only in the messes we make, but also the goodness we get.

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great American theologians of the 20th century, wrote a famous little prayer which instructs in that kind of faith. It may be the best celebration of New Year's faith that I know-- better than the wildest party, more effective than the longest list of resolutions. The most familiar part goes like this: "God, grant me the Serenity, to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference."

That in and of itself has clearly equipped millions to get through life's daily ups and downs. But Niebuhr didn't stop there. In the full version of his prayer he went on to say this:

Living one day at a time,

Enjoying one moment at a time,

Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.

Taking, as (God) did, this sinful world as it is,

Not as I would have it.

Trusting that (God) will make all things right
if I surrender to (God's) will.

That I may be reasonably happy in this life,

And supremely happy with (God) forever in the next.

As we prepare to turn another page, I think Niebuhr and Qohelet are on the same page: With God its always "about time." One Day at a Time" and for all eternity. Amen.