

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18  
Ephesians 6:10-20

Words of a Tired Old Preacher  
Crossroads Christian Church  
August 23, 2015 off lectionary

Every now and then I like to take a break from the lectionary, and preach a sermon that focuses on a whole book of the Bible—generally a shorter book. I invite you to look through the book, maybe even read it through in the days ahead, and reflect upon it. So here goes—a book sermon on Ecclesiastes.

Truthfully now—how many people saw today’s sermon title, “Words of a Tired Old Preacher,” and wondered, “How is that different from any other Sunday?” The difference is, although I may be old and sometimes tired, I am not the tired old preacher those words are referring to. The name Ecclesiastes is a translation of the Hebrew Qoheleth, which can be translated as Preacher, or Teacher, or someone who calls an assembly together. And he was tired. And old—old in age, older in spirit.

Although Ecclesiastes is sometimes been called the strangest book in the Bible, I’ve always had a soft spot for it. It’s a song in minor key, with beautiful sad words. And running all the way through it is the idea, “What goes around comes around.”

The Common English Bible translate the tired old preacher’s first words as, “Perfectly pointless, perfectly pointless. Everything is perfectly pointless.” You may be familiar with the more traditional translation, “Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.” That word, vain or vanity—or pointless—is repeated 9 time in the book, so it’s also a recurring theme. It doesn’t mean vain as in “You’re so vain I bet you think this song is about you,” it means vain as in empty or useless, a fleeting puff of breath.

He states his point in verses 3-11 about everything being pointless, then goes on to make his case. We work so hard, but, ultimately, why bother? All of nature, all of human society, “everything under the sun” seems to be a merry go round—lots of motion, but not going anywhere. The sun goes round, the wind does round, the rivers flow to the sea then the waters go back again. And every great new idea somebody has, well, somebody else probably thought of it before. We don’t remember the past, and when the future comes, they won’t remember us. It’s pretty depressing stuff, isn’t it? Last week I preached about living with change, and now Ecclesiastes is saying, nothing really changes. What goes around comes around and then goes around again.

Later in the book, he builds his case. He talks about having been king with great wealth and power and riches. But that didn’t make him happy. He talks about being a philosopher, boldly seeking truth. But that didn’t make him happy, either. It was like chasing the wind. He tried pleasure. He tried great building projects, but they too were pointless. Death comes to the poor and ignorant; death also comes to the wise and strong. So why bother?

He lapsed into depression. Finally, he concluded that only the simple things can bring satisfaction—eating, drinking, and working. He says in 1:24-26 “I also saw this is from God’s hand—who can eat and find enjoyment otherwise? --because God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those who please God.”

In chapter 3, the preacher turns reflective again. We heard Dan and Kathy sing “To every thing, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” That’s where those words come from. Everything has its place; birth and death, planting and harvesting, keeping silence and speaking, love and hate, even war and peace.

The preacher has great sound bites. Remember the Creator in the days of your youth. Eat drink and be merry. Two are better than one. Set your bread upon the waters. Then there’s the favorite proverb of students, “much study is a weariness of the flesh,” and the favorite proverb of editors, like I used to be, “of making books there is no end.” And, as the presidential primary races heat up, we remember this quote of the old, tired preacher. “The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.” The old sage considers the riddles of life, the frustrations of desires, and advises us to take life as it comes.

All through the book, the Preacher sways back and forth between utter cynicism and depression, and a quiet understanding that God wants something better for us. God’s will in many ways is inscrutable, yet trusting God will make you happier than ignoring God. Among his last words were: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”

Ecclesiastes is worth reading for its wisdom and the grace of its writing. It’s worth reading because when we feel sad or cynical or depressed, he’s a fellow traveler on the way. It’s worth reading because he works brutally hard at asking tough questions, and being honest about his doubts, and it’s good to know that our own doubts and questions can be steps on the road to faith. It’s worth reading because it challenges our tendency to make idols of success and power and wealth.

But why, why, you ask, should we talk about such a downer of a book? Well, as Paul Harvey used to remind us, there’s always the end of the story. And that makes all the difference.

To Ecclesiastes, death was the great equalizer. It also drained the meaning out of life. In 9:4 he says “But whatever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.” That’s the ultimate downer, although Snoopy in the old Peanuts cartoons said that “a living dog is better than a dead lion” was his favorite verse of the Bible.

What that tired old preacher didn’t have that we do have is Christian hope. He saw through the idols of wisdom and wealth, power and pleasure--

they couldn't dent the tired old preacher's depression. But we have the word of Resurrection. We know that death isn't the end. We know that the love of God is stronger than death, that nothing shall separate us from God's love. We know that in Jesus Christ God has done a new thing. The tired old preacher said, "there's nothing new under the Sun." The prophet Isaiah wrote in the darkness of exile: "I am about to make a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" And the John who wrote Revelation talks of the New Jerusalem, the New Heaven, and the New Earth that shall come at the End Time, and of the victorious Jesus saying, "See, I am making all things new."

Because of Christian hope, we can appreciate what Paul says in Ephesians 6:10-20. We can find strength and weapons against the forces that would pull us down into darkness and depression; we can put on the full armor of God—truth; justice; peace; faith; salvation; God's Spirit working in us and through us.

When we know of God's unfailing, unstoppable love, then suddenly those old things that once stopped making sense, make sense again, but in a different light. We can put aside our weariness over the humdrum routines of our lives, and we can enjoy God's good gifts, and be thankful for the beauty of this earth that God has given us. We can put aside our cynicism and learn to be more loving and caring. We can give up chasing after cheap pleasures and celebrate the little things—a baby's smile, a child's hug, the satisfaction of ordinary tasks well done. We can stop trying to chase after the wind with our selfish ambition, and find God's presence in enjoying the simple things of life. We can stop worrying and fretting and perfectionism, and see and appreciate the grace of God as we say grace around the table. Amen.

By Michael Dixon