

All Good Things...

As I've mentioned from the pulpit previously, Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth, to give its Hebrew name) is a long-time favorite for me. 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 only preached from it twice before; once from this passage and once from the first ten verses of chapter 9, to which I'll refer later. As I usually do when dealing with the Bible's less familiar books, I'll open with some basic information on Qoheleth but what I really want to think about this morning is how we know what season is upon us? How do we discern between the times to plant and the times to pluck up, between the times to laugh and the times to weep, between the time of war and the time of peace? And, also as usual, you'll get some pop culture references along the way, a little history, and some very personal musings from me.

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 (and here's that chapter 9 reference) that the model of life is: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has 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 (spouse) 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.

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

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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, later made even more famous by The Byrds and, for those of us in Europe at the time, by the Welsh singer Mary Hopkin. I'm guessing, by the way, that very few of you remember Mary Hopkin. She's most famous for another song, "Those Were the Days, My Friend," which she recorded for Apple Records, being one of the first artists who was not a member of The Beatles signed to that label. She was recommended by another icon of the Swingin' Sixties, Twiggy, to Paul McCartney, after Twiggy saw her on the long-running British TV talent show, "Opportunity Knocks." I watched Mary Hopkin win "Opportunity Knocks," as well, and she went on to a fine career in Europe. But I digress...

Back to JFK: I have wondered from time to time if President Kennedy drew inspiration from this passage during the critical moments of his presidency, perhaps during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It's a matter of historical record that Kennedy made every effort to distance his public image from Catholicism during his presidential campaign because of the then-lingering anti-Catholic feelings of Protestant America. Thank God, President Biden had no such issue. It's probably less known that, in private, Kennedy continued to be deeply influenced by his faith. This past week, I found online a pretty well-written master's thesis titled "Faith and the Face-Off: John F. Kennedy, Religion, and Averting Nuclear War During the Cuban Missile Crisis," written by Alison L. Davis for her degree in Liberal Studies at Rutgers. In her paper, Davis traces the glimpses of JFK's faith life during the tumultuous days of October 1962. Among others, she cites Dave Powers, Special Assistant to President Kennedy, who was co-author of the memoir, "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye." Powers remembers going to a National Day of Prayer service at Saint Matthews Church early in the crisis. The public did not yet know of the missiles in Cuba and neither did Powers. When he questioned why the President would take time for such a stop on a busy day, Kennedy told him, "We're going to need all the prayers we can get." Elie Abel's 1966 book, The Missile Crisis, records that John and Jacqueline Kennedy attended Mass on Sunday, October 21st, coincidentally my second birthday, which was the day before the President revealed the situation to the public. The following Saturday night, the President told Powers to be ready to attend mass at 10:00 the next morning, saying, "we'll have plenty of hard praying to do so don't be late." And, in fact, in the limo on the way to Mass the next morning, the President had the message from Premier Khrushchev that indicated an agreement on the missiles had been reached. Ralph Martin's book, A Hero for Our Time, notes that Kennedy told Dave Powers, as they prepared to leave for church, that they now had extra reason to pray, in gratitude, one assumes.

"A time for war, and a time for peace." What was it that propelled Kennedy to threaten war while preparing for peace? How did he know which course to take? How did he know which time it was? You and I, we may well pray, will never have that decision to make, a decision which impacted the whole world. But how do we decide, within the scope of our lives, what time it may be? A time to reap or a time to sow? A time to break down or a time to build up? A time to embrace or a time to refrain from embracing? Well, that one's a little more clear just now. With the rampant delta variant about, we need to be very careful about embracing those outside our household. But how do we discern the times and the seasons?

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Even the Bible has a number of different answers to this question. There are several examples in both the Old and New Testaments of God's people trusting, like their neighbors, that the casting or drawing of lots were divinely controlled. The Urim and Thummim mentioned as parts of the High Priest's breastplate, were apparently objects used in the casting of lots and are mentioned in this regard in I Samuel. The apostles drew lots in Acts 1 to choose a replacement for Judas. There's also the example, apparently favorable, of Gideon who put a test to God before he would commit the troops of Israel to battle against the Midianites. Do you remember the story of Gideon's fleece in Judges 6? "Then Gideon said to God, "In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said." And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew."

But I confess that I'm not a fan of making decisions by drawing lots. Something about my Southern Baptist upbringing and the prohibition against gambling (or even playing cards, although that admonition was roundly ignored by the youth choir, who wiled away the time on the bus during choir trips with endless rounds of "Spades"). And I'm a little shy about Gideon's example, too. I keep remembering that Jesus told the Tempter, "Thou shalt not put the Lord God to the test."

So, when I'm trying to gauge the times and to make decisions, I rely on both the wisdom of humans and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In the first, I guess I'm a little like Captain Picard in "Star Trek: The Next Generation." I hear as much information and opinion as I can from folks I trust in general or on that topic specifically. But unlike Jean-Luc, while I do ponder and think, I also pray. On a Sunday a few years ago, during a vacation or a sabbatical, Connie and I went down to Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church to hear Rev. Dr. Robert Manaway preach. He was talking about decision-making that morning, too, and I'll never forget what he said. He also advised the practice of hearing information and advice from those you trust. Then he advised prayer. Make sure you do it in that order, he said. God can ratify the advice of people, but people cannot ratify the advice of God. God gets the last word.

But how, you may ask, can we be sure that we are understanding what God is telling us? I John 4:1 recommends that we "test the spirits to see if they are from God." And as we read a little further in that chapter, we find John's reminder that God is love and that God showed God's love for us in sending the Son "so that we might live through him." If a spirit or an answer or a hunch is from God, it will lead us toward love. It will lead us toward loving others and toward loving God. If something is tempting us to be unloving, that's not God.

You may be wondering what has prompted my consideration of times and decision-making this morning. Connie and I have been in a season of decision-making for some time now. As you know, her career with AWS has taken off. Not only has she designed and implemented the training program for administrative and executive assistants throughout Amazon worldwide that

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earned her a “Finalists” role in the Leadership category of the recent Admin Awards for the Pacific Northwest, but the scope of her duties in Workplace Solutions has been increased to put her in charge of those services for Amazon Web Services offices in Portland, Oregon, and all Canadian offices, including those in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and others. While the Seattle offices are a perfectly fine place for her to be based, there are other AWS offices that offer other possibilities. Meanwhile, we have become increasingly aware that due to the high cost of living in the Seattle area, we will not be able to retire here. With retirement now less than a dozen years away, our “long-range sensors,” to borrow another Star Trek phrase, are on alert.

Finally, as I reported to you all last month, we’ve realized that our opportunities for quality time with the elders of our family are dwindling. My dad’s passing in November helped bring this into focus. Connie’s folks are now both in their eighties and experiencing more and more age-related health issues. Connie’s sisters have been suggesting to her for some time that she “come home” to help them care for their mom and dad. The eldest of my surviving close relatives are now my Aunt Donnie and Uncle Dick, Donnie Ann being my mom’s younger sister who has been like a surrogate mother to me since I was 17. They, too, are now in their eighties. Even among our friends, mortality has taken its toll. One of my longest-standing and dearest friends, Dave Houghton, died of cancer two years ago come October. We had always planned to do theatre again together once he retired but that opportunity will not come.

And so, after much consultation, much consideration, and much prayer, we have come to the very difficult decision that this is our time to pluck up over sixteen years’ worth of roots that we have nurtured among you and in Lynnwood. As the very last episode of “Star Trek: The Next Generation” and this sermon are both titled, “All Good Things...” must come to an end. This sermon serves as my notice of resignation, though a formal letter will go to the Deacons this afternoon. Our house will go on the market in three weeks; we hope to be on the road to St. Louis before the end of October in order to avoid driving through the mountains in the season of snow.

Although we truly believe that this is the right decision for our family, blessed by God, there is nevertheless a deep sense of grief at the consideration of this parting. You all have been our family for sixteen plus years. Your care for us, your graciousness, and your friendships have made this sojourn a blessed one, indeed. Connie and I regret the necessity for saying this goodbye over Zoom and social media. Perhaps there will be some safe way for us to gather again in person before our departure.

And I take great comfort in knowing that we leave Good Shepherd Baptist Church in its strongest position in years. You, the church, have a far more settled notion of your identity and your mission than when we started this journey together. We have just begun the new Deacon year with as strong a board as we’ve ever had. There is a wonderful pastoral team: Jorge and Stephen have exciting plans for their ministries to the immigrant communities in our area and the newly-ordained Rev. Aanenson knows our systems and operations, as well as being a preacher who has benefitted from your cultivation. Financial reserves are slim but that will improve as you are relieved of the burden of a near-full-time salary and can return to a pastor with a bivocational profile. So, I say to you once again with full confidence, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid. (Nothing) will be able to separate us from the love of

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God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And remember the theme for our 60th anniversary: “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to weep, and a time to laugh...” For Connie and me, it is time to resume our pilgrimage through this world, time to relocate, time to renew and explore. We face this time of change with bright hopes and with deep appreciation for what has been in this place. You all, too, will resume the pilgrimage of identifying new leaders, of reassessing goals, of boldly going into the future. May God bless us all with valiant hearts and unconquered spirits. Thanks be to God! Amen.