

## ***The Search for Meaning: Facing the Inevitable***

Stephen Van Kuiken  
Community Congregational U.C.C.  
Pullman, WA  
July 3, 2022

Ancient Witness: Ecclesiastes 3:1-9, 7:15-18

When I decided to do this series of sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes, I had no idea how appropriate it would be, based on the out-of-control direction taken by the right-wing majority of the Supreme Court and their extreme actions not only regarding reproductive rights, but also prayer in schools, gerrymandering, gun control and the ability of the Environmental Protection Agency to protect our earth and humanity from global warming. Indeed, this radical shift, it seems to me, threatens democracy itself.

And so the theme of Ecclesiastes is: “We’re doomed! Everything is futile!” And it seems to match the mood of many of us right now. The forces of wealth and greed and authoritarianism seem so strong, and catastrophe is looming in our young nation’s future. “What’s the point?” asks the Teacher.

Years ago, Billy Joel recorded a song in which he sang that “only the good die young.” For the rest of the song he tries to convince a Catholic girl that since this is true, it was a waste of time for her to be “good.” And although Ecclesiastes would find that Billy Joel’s conclusion is also empty, futile and chasing after the wind, he would agree with the first premise.

The traditional Jewish teaching has been that virtue is rewarded in this life, and vice is punished. Proverbs 8:6 represents this traditional view: “Right will protect the blameless life, but sin overturns the wicked.” Ecclesiastes writes that this is *just not true!* The good do die young; they are not protected from bad things any more than those who are evil. “There are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked,” writes the Teacher, “and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous.” (8:4) “There are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evil-doing.” (7:15) There are certain things that are inevitable, and we must learn to accept them. “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” (1:15)

There are certain things that are inevitable; there is an equilibrium and a balance to life that must be accepted. Here’s what you can count on, he says: “There’s a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” (3:2,4) There’s a time to get serious and work, and there’s a time to have fun and be happy.

Life has its limits, its ambiguity, its joy and its pain. Certain things are inevitable. Ecclesiastes is arguing that we need to embrace life and that this cannot be done selectively; life is a package deal. And we should be grateful for the whole thing. Brother David Stendl-Rast said that it’s not that happiness leads to gratefulness, but gratefulness leads to happiness.

As the author of the 23rd Psalm understood so many years ago, God does not save us from death. We will all inevitably die one day. God saves us from the *shadow* of death, from letting our lives be paralyzed by the fear of death.

The problem for Ecclesiastes is not that we all experience suffering, no matter how good we are. The problem is that we do not embrace life, that we settle for a pale, lifeless, non-adventurous middle ground. The problem lies in not accepting the seasons of change and in settling for a drab, colorless, unchanging world. The problem is that we live in reasonless worlds and jobs and churches and families of *emotional flatness*. No one really *mourns*, and no one really *dances*.

Dallas Willard wrote, “It is the act and discipline of faith to *seize the season* and embrace it for what it is, including the season of enjoyment.” This is what we are called to do—to seize and embrace the season for what it is.

It’s a real problem when we cannot fully enjoy the pleasures of this world. In C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, the devilish Uncle Screwtape is chiding his protege, Wormwood, for allowing his “patient” to read a book he really enjoyed and take a walk in the country that filled him with joy.

*In other words, you allowed him two real positive pleasures. Were you so ignorant as not to see the danger of this? The one who truly and disinterestedly enjoys any one thing in the world, for its own sake, and without caring twopence what other people say about it, is by that very fact forearmed against some of our subtlest modes of attack. You should always try to make the patient abandon the people or food or books he really likes in favor of the “best” people, the “right” food, and “important” books.*

The second reason why we don’t seize the seasons the way that Ecclesiastes would like is because of the very human fear of pain.

Somehow, we believe that in order for life to be good, we have to avoid pain. And the danger here is that we will become so good at not feeling pain that we will learn not to feel anything, including joy, happiness and reverence. We will become emotionally anesthetized, learning to live our whole lives within a very narrow emotional range. And so what we are left with is monotony, one gray day after another. We become practiced in the art of not feeling too much.

And this is the problem that Ecclesiastes is talking about. He is saying that when we protect ourselves against the danger of loss by teaching ourselves not to care too much, by not letting anyone get too close to us, we lose part of our soul. We let ourselves become less human, less alive. When we protect ourselves from disappointment by not wanting to be happy, we diminish our souls. The Teacher is saying that to be alive is to feel pain, and to hide from pain is to make ourselves less alive.

Harold Kushner talked about when he officiated at funerals, often bereaved relatives in the front row were uncomfortable, knowing that they ought to feel something—grief, pain—but they didn’t feel anything because they had never learned to let themselves feel. They never learned

the language of emotions. And he said that so often there would be an old woman crying at the top of her voice, “Why? Why did this have to happen? He was so good!” And there would be a forty-year-old man in a three-piece suit who would become very uncomfortable and say, “Can’t somebody make her shut up? Can’t somebody give her a sedative?” The fact is, said Kushner, the old woman is the only one in the room who is in her right mind. She knows that something painful has happened to her, and she is responding to it. The rest of us are too numb, too inarticulate in language of grief, to know what is happening to us.

And it is this life of numbness, of shallowness of feeling, that is a living death, says Ecclesiastes. And so then, so often we have this quest to feel more alive, to fill our lives with anything to bring us above our emotional flatness. But these alone are all dead ends and chasing after the wind, says the Teacher. Entertainment is not a substitute for feeling the depth of life.

One of the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grim is entitled, “The Tale of the One Who Went Forth to Learn Fear.”

*It is about a young boy who, no matter what he does, never feels afraid. He feels incomplete without the emotional dimensions of fear. So he goes out and has many hair-raising adventures, encountering ghosts and witches and fire-breathing dragons, but never feels even a shudder. In his last adventure, he frees a castle from a wicked spell, and in gratitude the king gives him his daughter in marriage. The hero tells his bride that, although he is fond of her, he is not sure he can marry her until he completes his mission of learning to feel fear. On their wedding night (at least in the version the Brothers Grim tell to children), his wife pulls back the covers and throws a bucket of cold water full of little fish over him. He cries out, “O my dear wife, now I know what it is to shudder,” and he is happy. (p. 99, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, Kushner)*

To be truly and authentically human, we must accept the inevitable. We must be ready to accept and feel pain or we will never fully know joy. We must be able to shudder. We must put away the lie that we can live pain-free lives and make room in our hearts for the tragic view of life. To fully embrace life is to embrace it in all of its changes and seasons.

It can be said that Jesus lived his life like this. He loved others deeply and passionately, and this love gave him much joy. It also motivated him to bring healing and to confront injustice. But it also opened him up to great pain and grief, from which he did not shrink. And it was said about Jesus that he was “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.”

There’s a traditional Buddhist story about embracing the fullness of life. A distraught mother came to the Buddha with her dead baby in her arms, and she pleaded that it might be restored to life. He listened compassionately to her, then sent her to fetch a mustard seed from a house where none had died. She sought for long, in vain, and then returned, and told him of her failure.

“My sister, thou hast found,” the master said, “Searching for what none finds—the bitter balm I had to give thee.”

The bitter balm that Buddha had to give the unfortunate woman was the understanding that *no one avoids sorrow, pain or death*. Paradoxically, finding out that these things are inevitable made her feel better, not worse. Previously she felt cruelly singled out by fate, which made her suffer unbearably. Although some painful sorrow remained, the woman joined Buddha's order of monks, vowing to spend her life helping others resolve their needless suffering.

In his classic book, *The Prophet*, Gibran wrote:

*Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.  
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with  
your tears.  
And how else can it be?  
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain...*

*Together they come, and when one sits along with you at your board, remember  
that the other is asleep upon your bed.*

“Fear not that life shall come to an end,” wrote John Henry Newman, “but rather that it shall never have a beginning.” This means embracing life and accepting the inevitable. It also means that pain does not have the last word. We will surprise ourselves by our ability to endure. And we will find the pain cannot blot out the love and tenderness of others. Like cracks of light, God's grace will still reach us and warm us. This, too, is inevitable!

Just as drops of water over aeons wear down gigantic mountains and form huge canyons, so does God's eternal presence persist. And so when we seize and embrace the seasons of life, we also accept God's inevitable, unstoppable love.