

## Joy In Spite of Circumstances

**Hab. 3:17-19, Eccl 3:1-8, Matt. 6:25-33 by Patty Friesen (Oct.10/21)**

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Whenever I've been asked in recent days what scripture has to say in our present time, I refer people to the treasure trove of the Psalms, those honest prayers of pain and grief and rage. I also point to the book of Amos, that brutal prophet of doom, which could have been written late last week. But there's another book for our present moment of despite the interconnected crises. It's the odd little book of Ecclesiastes.

One rarely hears Ecclesiastes in church these days, though the poem found in 3:1–8 is well known, due in part to “To everything turn! Turn! Turn. There is a season, turn, turn,” the Pete Seeger song that became a hit in the 1970's. The poem is a set of 14 opposed pairs of seasons: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to love and a time to hate, and so forth. Whatever the merits of the poetic sentiment, most biblical scholars think the real point comes after the poem; that even if there is a “season for everything and a time for every matter under the sun,” humans do not and cannot know what those times are. We have no control over the times or seasons. They just happen in their own course—and they just happen to us. And that, Ecclesiastes says, is exactly how God wants it (see 3:11, 14).

If this reading is accurate, the poem is a case of bait and switch: Ecclesiastes draws us in with sentiments that seem right or pious or wise, only to turn the tables and rebuff them. The author does this repeatedly, prompting one great scholar of Ecclesiastes, Michael Fox, to write pithily, “Ecclesiastes is crabby.” So what would

crabby old Ecclesiastes have to say about our time, about failed crops and all the other world disasters we are dealing with?

Two aspects of Ecclesiastes are important to keep in mind as we read with fresh eyes in light of our present crises. Both have to do with finitude. Everything is, in the end, finite, tenuous, ephemeral—all possible renderings of the Hebrew word “hevel,” usually translated “vanity,” a term that Ecclesiastes is particularly fond of.

Finitude is a real problem for Ecclesiastes. In brief: he doesn't like it. It irks him that death is the great leveler of people, that it places a great question mark over all good things, especially his own wise living. Despite how shrewd he's been, there's no guarantee that Ecclesiastes heirs won't be a bunch of fools, squandering everything that he so carefully and painstakingly acquired (2:18–21). To add insult to injury, at the end of his intelligent, disciplined life, he faces the same reward that any blundering dolt does—the cold hard ground of the grave. “Why then have I bothered to be so very wise?” he complains (2:14–17).

Ecclesiastes, it would seem, is crabby to the bitter end. And yet, it seems wise for us to give him another listen, especially in light of present circumstances. As Walter Brueggemann notes in *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, a small book he wrote about the pandemic, “any serious crisis is a summons for us to reread the Bible afresh.”

When we reread Ecclesiastes in our present moment, we are reminded that the human project is, at the end of the day, decidedly small. Our lives come to an end. We all know that, even though we tend to live in denial. But it's not just human lives, it's the human project broadly conceived. Institutions can think, and maybe even forests too,

and these can and have come to an end. What of economies, governments, nations, and states—do these end? Sure, of course, and as a matter of course.

To paraphrase more colloquially, I imagine Ecclesiastes asking us, “Well, what did you expect? That your economy could grow forever? That your business could turn a profit forever? That your country would be on top forever? That you could do what you are doing and the planet could handle it forever? That you could oppress other people forever?” Stupefied at our stupidity, he’d likely add, “Give me a break.”

But there is something else, something more Ecclesiastes wants us to know about this finitude that marks human life like the delicate spider web on the back porch railing. It is simply this: there is something precious and extraordinarily beautiful about these temporary glories.

This is the second piece of Ecclesiastes that speaks to present circumstances. The finality of finitude can, or rather should, cast into sharp relief—the highest definition possible—the exquisite nature of life in all its limitedness. C.S. Lewis, after the death of his beloved wife, Joy Davidman, came to the conclusion that “the pain I feel now is because of the happiness I had before. That’s the deal.” It turns out that these two opposed feelings exist in an inextricable feedback loop: happiness can have sharp edges because it ends; knowing it ends makes happiness that much sweeter.

Ecclesiastes urges us to find joy amid the limits of our present situation. And so that cantankerous writer commends joy to us—no fewer than seven times (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10; see also 7:14). A few biblical scholars have gone so far as to call him a “preacher of joy.” That probably goes a bit too

far, but it is nevertheless striking that, as cranky as Ecclesiastes is about finitude, he too stops to smell the roses.

In the words of the writer of this sermon Brent Strawn, “As I worried about the future this year, it suddenly dawned on me that, for the first time in many years, I had all three of my kids home, gathered every night around the dinner table and then the TV, looking for a binge-worthy distraction that could bring some measure of entertainment. The table under the bright kitchen lights, my spouse of 28 years, our children, our high-maintenance puppy, the decent food and drink at hand—all of that is, on the one hand, mundane, ordinary, everyday, and easy to take for granted. On the other hand, it is, upon reexamination, absolutely extraordinary, even glorious.

Don’t get me wrong: I frequently longed for the former days, and I wanted a break from 24-hour in-my-grill family intimacy. Finitude, has cast everything into sharp relief under those bright kitchen lights, and I have been—I am—grateful. If we can’t determine the time, and it simply happens without our permission, our say, or our ability to comprehend, then all that we can do is receive these seasons and, when possible, enjoy the gifts God has provided: food, companionship, even work (though Ecclesiastes often describes the latter as gloomy “toil”). I mean, these days, even a steady supply of toilet paper is something to rejoice over.

The way out of finitude is not by denying or escaping it. It’s by accepting it, and by doing and enjoying—what we can, while we can, within our profoundly inescapable and frustrating limitations. It can be a mode of surviving, maybe even a way of thriving. In the movie *Contact*, based on the book by Carl Sagan, the main character learns from her father that the best way to tune a long-distance radio is with “small moves”. The

kitchen table, the puppy, the family binge-watching—these are small moves. Sometimes small moves are all we can do to maintain spiritual and emotional health and they are also enough.

And so one of our small moves in spiritual health as a worshipping body is to partake in a small bit of dry wafer and a tiny cup of juice with joy and thanksgiving for the large gifts of grace in home and family and creation. Let us pray the communion liturgy by Pastor Nora...