

FRUIT FROM THE TREE OF LIFE

Play Frank Sinatra's "That's Life"

At first glance the book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most cynical and pessimistic books of the Bible. The poetry is beautiful but the sentiment seems to be "That's Life", Or "oy vey", Only the good die young, or "Why do bad things happen to good people". It answers these questions, actually, quite well. But I am thinking it is much more like Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life". You know the Christmas movie starring Jimmy Stewart as the failed banker George Bailey. Where bad things happen but the good is always there

I would like to illustrate that with a real story. One that I sadly had to witness from way too close. This is the story of one of the pharmacists I worked with for 26 years. We had coffee and lunch daily together for many years. I knew his nurse wife before I met him and before she met him. This is one of the people I have had the honor of knowing for years and years. Both he and his wife are faithful to church and God, even though the wife had had to struggle with the church not accepting her divorce from her previous husband. The wife brought a young boy into their new relationship and my friend adopted the boy. Everything went along, as lives do, with ups and downs until Christmas of the boy's sophomore year in college. The boy who was now 20 came home very ill. He was kept in ICU for a week while we tried to find out what was wrong with him. He got a little better and was discharged. The tests came back the next month to find out that the boy had HIV. He had acquired HIV with a relationship with another man. Now, my friend who was very homophobic had to change his demeanor, his jokes, and his whole thinking process. If that isn't bad enough, now the story starts to go downhill. The boy went out and bought an expensive sports car on his own, drove it to Portland with no intent or means to pay for it. He wrecked the car. He was arrested for car theft. My friend mortgaged his house to raise bail and pay for the car. As soon as the boy was out of jail he took off, leaving his family, both my friend and the boy's natural father, on the hook for the bail and the car. He has never been seen again except that his younger sister thought she may have seen him at a concert in Portland. She described him as gaunt and sickly. He couldn't have sought medical care without being arrested. Oh the good side of the story. All remain committed Christians. They have remained righteous. Yes, they had to rebuy their house. He had to work years after he would have retired. But like the sage in Ecclesiastes they remained faithful.

The book of Ecclesiastes was written during the post-exilic period, perhaps around 300 B.C., at a time of relative stability, a time when national and religious passion was expressed in routine Temple worship. The dynamic theology surrounding the return to Jerusalem had now become a settled orthodoxy, guided by the wisdom sages.

The Teacher was a thoughtful man, not country bred like David but city bred like Solomon. He had known the intensity of scholarship, the complexity of planning and administration, the effort to gain wealth, the joy and pain of writing books. He was a

scholar and a poet. Word pictures swirled through his mind and into his language. He reasoned in concrete rather than abstract imagery. When he wrote of death, he pictured a pulley wheel broken on the old family cistern (Ecclesiastes 12:6). As an old man, he remembered episodes from the past. He was able to say those words so exasperating to youth, "I've been down that road!"

Some scholars think he was a bachelor. He writes about a tragic love affair, a time when his heart was vulnerable. But the woman jilted him, broke his heart, and left him disillusioned (7:26). Whenever he mentions children, he refers to the children of others, usually in terms of inheritance. He urges men to be faithful to their wives-as if he were an onlooker-and admonishes them to enjoy their marriage.

Now, picture this gray-haired Teacher sitting, looking over Jerusalem as the sun begins to sink behind the wall. The cataracts in his eyes blur his vision so the sights of the city, especially at dusk, are softened. His hearing misses the high tones so the evening sounds are not so sharp. His hips and knees feel the ache of arthritis; he shifts his position from time to time. His thoughts reach out to merchants closing their shops, to housewives cooking the evening meal, to children running home from their games. He glances at the Temple where the priests have been offering the sacrifices. He looks across to the school where he and his fellow teachers have spent their lives explaining Torah to the upper-class youth in Jerusalem, preparing them for careers in business, government, and Temple service. He undoubtedly taught his students the message he penned in his book. He wanted his book of wisdom to help others avoid the foolishness he had experienced and observed.

I've Tried It Myself

He begins his teaching thinking about the study of wisdom. "I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 1:13-14, NIV).

"What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" (1:3).

He questions the assumption that the righteous are rewarded by health, wealth, and happiness in this life and sinner punished by illness, poverty, and early death. What about random events, accidents beyond human intervention or control?

Thoughts of fate or chance nearly drive him crazy. He has been taught that God rules, God is just, the righteous prosper. The Chronicler taught that the kings who trusted God caused Judah to have peace, and kings who followed their own devices led Judah into destruction and exile. A plus B equals C.

His observations are "under the sun," for he thinks only in the framework of this world. He uses the word *all* because everything that happens is within the Creator's design and control. No exceptions, or so it seems. So when bad things happen to good people, or when good things happen to bad people, where is God? Where is justice? This mysterious

world is neither predictable nor comprehensible. Death is everywhere. Just as surely as the sun rises and sets, every man, woman, child, and every beast of the field will die. The grave is the destiny of all. Much thinking and planning is chasing the wind.

The Teacher becomes personal, saying in effect, I've studied hard to figure out life, trying to understand how to live a good life. The more I learned, the less I knew. The more I studied, the more headaches I got. "The wiser you are the more worries you have" (1: 18), Trying to understand it all is absurd. The mystery is deep, too deep for the human mind. No use trying to heap up wisdom and joy (2:26) or trying to predict the future (10: 14).

I was taught

"The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death" (Proverbs 13:14).

But I discovered that just as the fool dies so will I. What good is my wisdom? I know it is better to have eyes in our head than to walk like a fool in darkness (Ecclesiastes 2: 13-14), but in the end what have we gained by trying to understand God's ways and the way life works? It's like trying to grab hold of the wind (2: 17). I even thought maybe I'd leave my wisdom to somebody else, somebody younger perhaps, but "who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?" (2: 19). What do people get for all their anxious study? "All their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest" (2:23). Those who want to store up wisdom are wasting their time.

I've Tested Pleasure

Finding the effort to store up wisdom futile, the Teacher decided to test pleasure as the way to the good life (Ecclesiastes 2: 1). So he experimented to see if sensual pleasure would make him happy. With deliberate strategy he delighted his eyes with fishponds and garden pools. He massaged his ego by building beautiful buildings. He tried music, banquets, and bars to find out what pleasure is all about. He tried women. None of it made him happy. His experiences left him hollow and dissatisfied. (We see that in those who win lotteries only to be poorer than they started and in the celebrities that we watch on the news struggle with drugs, alcohol and violence) He pretended to be a king. He said I've seen parents work hard and long into the night only to loose all in bad investment. For example the financial melt down of 2008 where millions of honest good hard working people lost their life savings, some of them here in our own congregation.

He noticed that some good people have lots of trouble and some wicked people seem to have all the luck. Some wicked are not apprehended or not convicted when they are caught. (Drew Peterson who apparently got away with murdering four wives, O.J., and Casey Anthony).

The teacher says "I thought about trying to change things, but the crookedness in this world will never be straightened out. Things never change – rearrange or reorganize

sometimes but never change, Cruelty and oppression recur. The powerful use their power to keep control, to look after themselves. Do you think the rich listen to the poor or that the powerful pay attention to the weak?"

This sounds almost hopeless but it is not. Here is the hopeful part of the message. Just because life is like a breath doesn't mean it is not worth breathing.

WISDOM

No sense in staying up all night worrying about the Universe. "When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day or night, then I saw all the work of God. Wisdom has value. It is better to be wise than foolish. But do not act too wise or pretend you are very good. Once you come to grips with the brevity of life you will be wiser than most. Obey the laws of God. Listen to the instructions, even though you don't know whether your obedience will pay off.

WORK

The teacher saves his strongest words for the foolishness of trying to get ahead, trying to lay up wealth for the future. It's better to work than to be idle. Our appetites are never satisfied. Toiling miserably and anxiously day after day to accumulate wealth is useless, futile. But work is necessary—toilsome though it is. Work also can provide some satisfaction. There is "a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to tear, and a time to sew." Work is a part of the rhythm of life,"

PRUDENCE

Because time and chance come to everyone, because no one knows which way the wind of fortune will blow tomorrow, better diversify your investments. Who knows which will succeed and which will fail. If you wait until the sun and wind are just right, you'll never plow or plant. Be of generous spirit "cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again".

LOVE

Intimacy, friendship, marital love – these draw the teacher's gentle affirmation. "Two are better than one" (ecc 4:9) Friends can work more effectively and enjoyably, even though tomorrow may never come. If one stumbles, the other can offer aid. Two sleeping in the same bed can stay warm. If three friends stand together, they will not likely be overpowered (4:10-12).

What should a married man do with his brief life? Not make the bar scene, not fall into sexual escapades but "enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your life that are given you under the sun. (9:9) Marital love, sexual togetherness is affirmed as one of the temporal blessings. Enjoy your marriage.

DEATH

Is the teacher's description of the slow decline of the human body morbid. No. We're to face death, eyes straight ahead, shoulders square (ecc 12:1-8). This advice is not meant to be morbid, but to help us evaluate life, think about our few days. Our prayer comes from Ps 90:12 "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom". The young are urged to "Remember your creator in the days of your youth" (ecc12:1), not just to be respectful of God but to get a grasp on the brevity and the preciousness of life.

Aging is not tragedy. Death is not defeat. Growing old is like the sun going down in the west. God's appropriate rhythms are at work. Sunsets, like sunrises, can be glorious. There is "a time to be born and a time to die" "He has made everything suitable (beautiful) for its time.

READING THIS SUMMER

This summer I have read many books but two of interest are "The Information" and "Chaos Theory" Both about current mathematical and modern physics principles. "The Information" deals with the origin and the eventual probable total entropy (the amount of disorder or cooling) in the universe. The book on Chaos theory deals with non-linear mathematics and fractals. Both are fascinating to me. But there is a gem in my reading that seems to go along with Ecclesiastes. From the famous quote from Albert Einstein where he and Werner Heisenberg were discussing the "Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle" when Einstein said "God does not play dice with the Universe". The gem from these two books is that "God does indeed play dice with the universe, but the dice are loaded" That would agree with the teacher in Ecclesiastes.

WHAT IS GOOD?

Life is God's greatest gift – all life – the good and the bad, the long and the short, the past and the hint of eternity and the seeming finality of the grave. We must not waste time and energy chasing after the wind, because to only a few people is given the capacity to enjoy life. The good gift of God is the freedom to enjoy the daily gifts, the simple gifts, find pleasure in the day's work, open their hand to the poor, have a few friends, feel good after a shower, enjoy a meal, love their spouse, and smile when the young people are excited about life. "Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all"(11:8). That is why the end is better than the beginning. (7:8). A successful completion is no small thing. Spending one's life rejoicing is a suitable and beautiful part of the rhythm of life, like the sun rising and going down.