The Search for Happiness 2: God's Action
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Intro to the reading

Last Sunday we began a 3-part series on selected passages from Ecclesiastes. Our reading was verse 1 of chapter 1 to verse 26 of chapter 2. We saw that the principal topic of Ecclesiastes is the origin and nature of happiness. The writer of the book, Qoheleth, described a thought experiment that explored this main question. The experiment gave three results: (1) that working hard does not lead to ultimate happiness – it is only a mirage; (2) that both the wisest and the most foolish suffer the same final fate – death; (3) that indulging in the ultimate forms of pleasure leads nowhere – all it is is like chasing after the wind. Qoheleth concluded that true happiness can only be from Providence – it is a gift of God. It is not the reward of hard work, wisdom or sensual pleasure.

Today, we look at a passage in Ecclesiastes that is well-known to many, Christian or non-Christian, religious or non-religious. Set to music in the late 1950s by the late Pete Seeger, folk singer and social activist in the late 20th-century, it became a plea for world peace, particularly during the Vietnam war era in the 1960s and 70s.

[Here is a video composite of the song: from the 1962 country style of the Limeliters, to the 1965 electric guitars of the Byrds, to the later interpretation by Judy Collins.]

The lyrics covered only verses 1 to 8 of Ecclesiastes chapter 3. It is necessary to read through to verse 15 as we will do today in order to begin to grasp what this enigmatic passage is saying to us concerning the origin and nature of happiness.

Let us listen to Yuka as she reads from the 2019 translation.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Sermon: "The Search for Happiness: God's Action"
(Part 2 of 3 on selected passages from Ecclesiastes)

I confess that when I first became interested in paintings, that I found it difficult to appreciate abstract art. To me, the art of the Renaissance era and up to the modern period were very accessible, for example, Leonardo da Vinci, Monet, Seurat, van Gogh, Picasso, Klimt and other masters. Abstract art on the other hand demanded too much from the viewer, me, that I tended to ignore them, too lazy to even try to figure out why I would react in the various ways that I did to what I thought should make some sense but didn't. The difficulty that I had with abstract art was all of challenging, annoying, frustrating and opaque combined. Very rare would I have an epiphany of how I thought the artist wanted the viewer to react to the forms and colours that are intentionally obscure, or so I thought. What I didn't realize that the very ambiguity of these

forms and colours put together create the ground for flights of creative imagination on the part of the viewer.

For example, the four panels on the screen, the Four Gospels, is the work of Makoto Fujimori. The art is abstract in genre, that is, the forms and colours do not have any referents to what we see in the physical world, and yet they evoke in us a sense of the material world. What's more, the ambiguity of the art pushes us to think beyond what we see. In abstract art, we sense the transcendent, the incorporeal ideas and concepts that realistic art paradoxically veils.

Reading Ecclesiastes chapter 3:1-8 is akin to looking at abstract art, I will claim. The passage is at first glance a mundane list of contrasts which when taken individually do not communicate complexity. When taken all together as a group the passage acquires poetic quality. The poetic quality arises from the ambiguity or non-deterministic quality of the list itself. The beauty of poems resides in the way words interact with each other in verses and stanzas such that the whole evokes a transcendence beyond the dry technical definitions of each one. The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. Similarly, the Ecclesiastes list when taken all together invites us to discover vast meaning in the text, meaning that only we upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit would discern, as shaped by our individual circumstances from day to day.

An important side note: this is the principal difference between a person reading Scripture from the perspective of Christian faith, as opposed to another who reads it without faith. Said differently, when we come together like this, it is not I delivering Biblical insights to you, it is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit who speaks directly to your heart through the written text, all praise and honour be to our God. In a real sense, I may lead you to the waters, but it is God alone who quenches your thirst.

So it is with our passage today: productive in its ambiguity, but unproductive when bound to a literal reading.

The very first verse: "For everything there is a season; a time there is for every matter under heaven" immediately should raise the question: Who controls the seasons? This is indeed a rhetorical question as the seasons are beyond human control. Who controls the time frame and sequence of every matter under heaven through the seasons? This is really a complicated question as it highlights the tension between humanity's desire to control everyting, versus the rhythm and cycles of life. We see this tension in what we consider the noble task of organizing our time: 1 hour for this, 2 hours for that, 30 minutes for the phone call, 5 minutes for the friendly conversation. And don't forget gym time. This very first verse invites us to ask ourselves: Are we really in control of our time on earth?

"A time to give birth, a time to die." "Give birth" does not distinguish between man or woman. It really means "beget" as in Abraham begat Isaac in the genealogical list of Matthew chapter 1. Is this therefore a general description of lifespans, the time from birth to death that is really beyond our control, today's medical-assisted-in-dying or MAID notwithstanding?

"A time to plant, a time to uproot." Does this not mean the agricultural cycle? Once more, do we control the season when we should plant, the season when the field is ready for harvesting?

The next contrast pair is extremely difficult: “a time for killing, a time for healing.” Some have said that it brings to mind the complex interconnectedness of human realities. The meaning is very opaque: is “killing” intentional or unintentional, legal or illegal, state-mandated or murder, killing by disease or medically assisted? Are resources for healing to be dispensed as in a battlefield triage? Think of emergency rooms right now, for example. Moving away from the literalness of “killing” and “healing”, is this verse declaring the truth that an action however small always will have consequences? Does this sound like chaos theory and the so-called butterfly effect?

“A time for demolishing, a time for rebuilding.” Is this not humanity’s pattern of living? We love to repair that which is broken, from toys all the way to buildings and nuclear reactors, even space telescopes.

The most accesible in the list of contrasts is perhaps: “a time for weeping, a time for laughing; a time for lament, a time for dancing.” This is a parallel/anti-parallel construction; Inner lament is manifested in crying, while inner joy or laughing manifests as dancing.

The next one is probably the most enigmatic: “a time for throwing stones, a time for gathering stones; a time for embracing, a time for not embracing.” The simple reading is that one must first gather stones before you can throw any away. Too shallow. What does this have to do with embracing/not embracing that follows immediately? Others opine that it has something to do with building, the gathering of stones – but again, what about embracing/not embracing? Or are these two contrasts totally unrelated one to another even if written in the same breath? Others have suggested that this pairing has something sexual about it, but we’re not going to go there this morning.

I will leave you to meditate on the last 6 contrasting pairs. I suggest that you read them one at a time and slowly, always with a prayer to God for understanding. Let your mind be led by the text and reach places you might not have previously anticipated in this complex and ambiguous, artfully and evocatively composed text.

In verse 9, Qoheleth comes back to the principal thesis of Ecclesiastes: “What success have the workers from all their hard work?”

From our study last Sunday, Qoheleth’s first thought experiment gave the answer: “none.” To this we must, perhaps grudgingly, agree. In this second thought experiment, the list of contrasts for whatever meaning they pack for you for whatever circumstances you are currently in, simply drive home the point that none of us are ultimately in control of the grand scheme of life. The cycles and rhythms of life and of creation go on with or without our intervention.

What then is left to us? Where is happiness in all of these?

Verse 10 heralds Qoheleth’s conclusion: “I saw the task God gave humans to tackle.” The complexities, the joys, the sorrows, the triumphs, the heartbreak – they all are from God.

And to this, we ask: Why, God? Why?

And this heart-rending question that we so want to repress does break out every now and then in times of great pain and distress. Where then is happiness?

Indeed God made everything beautiful – starting with the Garden of Eden. But because of the disobedience of the man and the woman, they were driven out of paradise. God placed cherubim and a flaming sword to prevent the man and the woman from accessing the tree of life. If the man and the woman did not want or intend to go back to paradise, why would the cherubim have been necessary? This desire to go back to paradise, the desire for perfection and happiness, the desire for the ideal, the beautiful, the perfect – this we inherited from the man and the woman who wanted to go back to Eden but couldn't. God "has placed eternity in our hearts" as verse 11 declares. Creation is still beautiful – just gaze at the mountains in the Rockies, the oceans on both coasts east and west, the multitude of stars on a really dark cloudless night. Yet, because of the disobedience of the man and the woman, we are reduced to working hard to try and recreate that perfection around us. This is all a mirage, a chasing after the wind.

Qoheleth's solution stated in verse 12 and 13 is to continue to seek happiness and the good in life, and always see the hand of God in this ability to enjoy life which is a gift from God. This is providence. Essentially, Qoheleth concludes that doing good brings happiness, in direct contrast to what Qoheleth found out from his first thought experiment, that happiness does not come from hard work, wisdom nor self-indulgence.

So the question still remains: God, why does it have to be this way? Qoheleth's short answer is this: so that humanity will fear God, verse 14. This too needs to be unpacked, but for another time.

What is encouraging and reassuring for us now is in verse 15, the final verse of our reading today. God is permanent and the life cycles and rhythms God ordained from the beginning cannot be changed. God was, God is, and God ever shall be. And at the same time that God gives us a difficult task, God also "seeks out what is being pursued by men", that is, happiness. Qoheleth declares that God is concerned and engaged in our search for happiness. The answer to our heart-rending question is there, always present in God – we only need to open our very being to God, to Providence and continue to do good.

I will close with a 5-min video from Makoto Fujimoro – his journey in Christ, and his own search for happiness that he calls the search for love, and his expression of this fundamental life question via his art.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=lKu1f3TWlQQ

To the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all the glory forever and ever.
Amen.