

“Wisdom from the Margins: Ecclesiastes, Part One”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 5th 2018 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Ecclesiastes 2: 1-23

And so we come to the fourth of our scrolls: *Ecclesiastes*, a Greek word which seeks to translate the Hebrew word *Kohleth*, which—roughly speaking—translates into English as “the preacher”. The book of the Preacher...or as some translations have it: the book of the Teacher! However we translate it’s title, while the Hebrew Bible places *Ecclesiastes* among the five scrolls (wedged right in-between Lamentations and Esther), Christian Bibles have tended to place it among the wisdom books, generally following immediately on the heels of *Proverbs*. And yes: there’s a cynical side to me (cynicism, of course, is very much the order of the day where *Ecclesiastes* is concerned)...

...there’s a cynical side to me that cannot resist thinking: of course, it’s placed with the wisdom books, where else would you put it? It’s certainly not a prophetic book, most certainly would be ill-fitting placed in the middle of the history books and forget about adding it to the Pentateuch as a sixth book of Moses: impossible since *Ecclesiastes* is traditionally attributed to someone who comes along much later than Moses, namely King Solomon. And so yes: given the divisions we make use of in the Christian Old Testament, *Ecclesiastes*—if it was going to be placed in the Bible at all!—was pretty much bound to find its way into the wisdom books. But what a strange...what an unlikely book of wisdom this one turns out to be.

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Mind you: if you open just about any chapter of *Ecclesiastes*, you will certainly find much that would count as conventional wisdom, not only in the Hebraic world, but in most cultures ancient and modern. *A good name is better than precious ointment. (7:1). The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. (10:8). In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening withhold not your hand. (11:6).* And finally: those gems from this morning’s reading: *there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. (2:13,14).* Each of those pointed one-liners would be at home in *Proverbs*, or just about any wisdom literature found in most ancient cultures. The problem, however, is that by cherry-picking such excerpts, we do a wonderful job of distorting the entire book. Consider!

Consider the difference between the way in which the book *Proverbs* gets underway, and the way in which *Ecclesiastes* launches. *Proverbs* begins with a virtual advertisement, offered on behalf of wisdom and all of its benefits.

*To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
Let the wise hear and increase in learning...*

That is the voice of wisdom, urging all to follow in her ways. By contrast, hear the way in which the preacher begins his offering at the start of *Ecclesiastes*.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

Or as some translations rightly put it:

*“Meaningless, everything is meaningless”,
says the Teacher.
“Everything is completely meaningless,
Nothing has any meaning!”*

If that can plausibly be regarded as the voice of wisdom, it must certainly be counted as the painfully *chastened* voice of wisdom: chastened, no doubt, but lived experience.

Indeed! Nowhere is that better illustrated than by this morning’s reading from the book’s second chapter. The preacher examines three types of life and finds each of them wanting. First up to the plate is the life of pleasure; given the book’s traditional attribution to King Solomon—and given the immensity of his wealth and the size of his harem—it is only to be expected that the enumeration of those pleasures is a lengthy one. And yet, at the end, here’s the conclusion that we’re offered. *Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*

Okay! Alright! Having given up on a life of pleasure, the preacher then considers a life in which wisdom is sought and acquired: and he does not hesitate to insist that he must be numbered amongst the wisest of all men (a judgment confirmed by the first few chapters of 1st Kings). And yet, here again: disillusionment awaits him. *For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

Charming, hey: but we’re not quite done, not just yet! Last up is a life of toil: a life in which we throw ourselves into physical labor and are rewarded to see tangible evidence of our work, tangible participation in the fruits of those labors. And yes: by now you likely realize that sort of life isn’t going to work out any better for the preacher than any other sort of life. *What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with*

which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

And you thought *Lamentations* was a depressing book!

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I have long regarded...long regarded *Ecclesiastes* as the most peculiar book—the most unexpected book—to be found in our scriptures. Far and away! Hands down! And yes: I realize that *Ecclesiastes* is often lumped together with *Job* as the **two** most peculiar books in the Bible. From where I stand, however, there's really no contest: *Ecclesiastes* wins that particular race by a country mile.

Yes: I realize full well that *Job* features a character who chooses to shout some awfully defiant words in God's direction. In my humble opinion, it is the very fact that *Job* is prepared to shout and rail—even if it is shouting and railing directed at the Holy One—that makes *Job* align quite well with what I regard as the central theme of the Bible: namely God's passionate embrace of the world God made, the key word there being passionate. *Job*'s passionate desire to experience the justice of God is precisely what *Job* has in common—at least in tone—with the bulk of our scriptures, in which Christ's passion and death...

...notice how the word passion even figures into the central New Testament facet of our Biblical heritage!...

...*Job*'s passionate outcry against God's perceived indifference toward him and his plight, is very much in keeping with a Biblical saga that reaches its climax with the self-offering (on the Cross) of that saga's central character. Passion is the order of the day throughout our scriptures, and *Job* is no exception.

By contrast, if I were going to pick one word with which to describe the essential attitude of *Ecclesiastes*, I think the word I would choose would be a word that really isn't a word, namely: "meh". "Meh"...as in "big deal". "Meh"...as in "so what?" "Meh"...as in: "is that all there is?"

And you know: earlier in the week, Alison and I were emailing back-and-forth in the hope that we would find the perfect music for her to use for a gentle solo: to bridge us from the scripture reading to the sermon. Not surprisingly, she eventually hit upon the perfect choice: that wonderful piece by Erik Satie. But the first selection she sent me—tongue-in-cheek—was a YouTube recording of a song by Ella Fitzgerald that bore the wonderful title: "You're blasé". Yup! That's the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*. Blasé: terrific word that! But then I responded to her suggestion with one of my own: a YouTube video of Peggy Lee's famous world-weary ditty, "Is that all there is?" That really and truly is the question the author of *Ecclesiastes* appears unwilling to relinquish. "Is that all there is?...is that **really** all there is?"

And you know: there is a profound sense in which *Ecclesiastes* ought to be regarded as the most “adult” book in the Bible. I don’t mean adult in the sense that **we** mean adult when we slap a Restricted rating on a film or late-night TV show. No. I mean “adult” in the way I think the English poet William Blake meant “experienced” when he prepared a series of poems that he labeled “Songs of Experience”, offered in contrast to another series of poems labelled “Songs of Innocence”. There is nothing “innocent” about *Ecclesiastes*; there’s nothing child-like about it. *Ecclesiastes* is a book that could only have been written by someone who had lived long enough to see their fair share of disillusionment: someone who seems to be suggesting that one key to a happy life...is to not expect all that much out of life.

And yes: that really is a disarming perspective to run across in the midst of a Biblical heritage that regards God not only as the Creator of a world pronounced good and very good in the beginning, but a Biblical heritage that proceeds to delineate the unending energy, creativity and patience with which God seeks to restore that world and redeem its people. Remarkable! Remarkable not so much that there exists in this world a voice as cynical as the voice of the Preacher in *Ecclesiastes*..

...but that we get to hear such cynicism from **within** the canon of our Holy Book...rather than simply from those throwing cynical stones from the outside looking in! Remarkable that the cynic out there...is given a small space in here: the place of faith...the Biblical **fount** of our faith. Remarkable! Remarkable indeed! But please don’t get me wrong!

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It’s not that *Ecclesiastes* has no place for God in it. *Ecclesiastes* often pauses in its cynicism just long enough to insist that God is in the midst of this mess, and that we—frail human beings that we are—will be best served by aligning our own desires and actions with those of God. From that perspective, *Ecclesiastes* is a thoroughly orthodox piece of writing: a God affirming book! And yet, the God affirmed here is the God who, in effect, says to us: “this is life, make of it what you will...but keep your expectations reasonable because there is a more than reasonable likelihood that you’re gonna derail sooner rather than later.” In other words: even when *Ecclesiastes* is naming God and directing us toward God, it’s still insisting upon seeing life from the ground up, seeing life not as we might wish for it to be, but as life really and truly is for the vast majority of human beings in the vast majority of times and places. And no!

None of that is likely to warm the cockles of our hearts. But maybe...just maybe...*Ecclesiastes* isn’t meant to warm the cockles of our hearts. While I would most certainly not be a fan were the message of *Ecclesiastes* scripture’s **ultimate** message for us...I, for one, am grateful for its presence in our scripture. Less for the specific bits of wisdom it contains...

...next Sunday I’ll try to highlight some of the very practical gems this book has on offer...

...but I treasure *Ecclesiastes* and return to this odd book not so much for its practical wisdom, but rather in gratitude for the fact that my own inner cynic is delighted to hear a voice that it can call its own right here inside the pages of our big-book: a voice which can easily trump my own cynicism, even on my most burned-out, world-weary, throw-my-hands-up-in-the-air cynical of days. For that I am grateful...grateful that our tradition makes room even for that; grateful that **our God** makes room even for that.

And so yes. In the world-weary spirit of *Ecclesiastes*, by way of response I offer a quiet...but heart-felt: "Alleluia! Amen"!