

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

The Book of Ecclesiastes is an interesting book. It's an example of Biblical "wisdom literature" – a genre you find also in the Book of Proverbs and some of the Psalms. It's author, tradition attributes it to King Solomon, is known as "the teacher" or "the preacher" – which in Latin is "Ecclesiastes". He meditates on the meaning of human life, and how humans should choose to live.

But the tone of Ecclesiastes is quite different from a lot of the other wisdom literature in Scripture. In this genre, we are called to live with wisdom and righteousness. But often in this literature, and we see this especially in Proverbs, we are told to expect earthly rewards for righteousness.

Here is Proverbs 3:1, "My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you."

Or Proverbs 10:27-28, "The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short. The hope of the righteous ends in gladness, but the expectation of the wicked comes to naught."

There is more nuance to this theme within Proverbs than these quotes indicate. There are many lines in Proverbs, for instance, that praise the value of seeking virtue even when you are in the midst of sorrow or poverty – lines that acknowledge the reality of human suffering, even for those who diligently seek to live a Godly life.

But still, there is a powerful message in a lot of wisdom literature that says "If you do good, you will be rewarded. If you do bad, you will be punished." And while that sounds nice for the righteous, I think these sayings are some of the hardest in Scripture, because so often the world does not look like that to us. As Jesus himself says, "God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust."

So then we have Ecclesiastes – a strong counterpoint to other parts of the tradition. Ecclesiastes, who says, "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing." He names that frustration, that apparent injustice that parts of Proverbs seem to want to ignore.

Ecclesiastes stands with books of the Bible like the Book of Job. Job was a righteous man who suffered grief and loss in his life, despite his righteousness. And in the story of Job, Job's friends come to him as he grieves the death of his children. First, his friends mourn with him. But then they take turns explaining to him that he must have done something wrong, and that this tragedy was punishment for some sin.

God himself vindicates Job and says that he was indeed righteous, and did not sin even in the midst of his sorrow.

The teacher in Ecclesiastes would probably not have made the kind of speech Job's friends made. He looks at the world and does not hold back from naming the oppression and the injustice that he perceives. Which is a voice we need to hear in Scripture.

The books of the Bible do not stand in isolation. The word of God speaks to us through the whole Bible – the whole canon of Scripture. And so, just as we need to look for the context of a verse of Scripture, so, too, we need the context of all of these books together – Job and Proverbs, Psalms and Ecclesiastes, and more! We cannot simply pick the books we like, or the ones we think seem most true to us. When we look to Scripture seeking the truth about the nature of God and humanity and the world, we must look at the whole witness of the Scriptural tradition together.

So Ecclesiastes calls to our minds the question of why bad things happen to good people. He warns us away from looking at the misfortunes of others and assuming they did something to deserve them.

And while many of us may not be inclined to assume that doing good always leads to rewards from God, still I think there is a temptation for all of us to look at those in deep poverty or other types of trouble and believe that they must have contributed somewhat to their own misery.

But if Ecclesiastes is a helpful counterpoint to this tendency in human nature, this book needs a counterpoint within the Bible as well. If you just sit down and read this book, (And you could! It's only 8 pages long!) it doesn't leave you with an altogether hopeful message.

We certainly can hear that in the passage from Ecclesiastes for this morning, where the teacher says: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity . . . It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind."

The word "vanity" in this book speaks about the brief, fleeting nature of mortal life. It doesn't refer to "vanity" the sin of pride – rather, it's supposed to indicate how quickly life slips away. The Hebrew word "havel" can also mean like a puff of air that just lasts a moment. The word is also the name of Cain's brother – whom we call in English "Abel" – whose own life was brief and ended too soon at his own brother's hand.

So the fleeting nature of mortal life is what preoccupies the author of Ecclesiastes. In our passage today, the Teacher speaks with some despair about all the work he put into amassing land and property, and how it might be squandered by those who come after him. He questions why people torment themselves with so much labor and toil when they can take nothing with them when they die.

And the advice he gives most frequently in this book is to choose not to live like that. Instead, he encourages his readers to find the pleasure that God offers in life. To take pleasure in the work that has been given to you to do. To enjoy leisure. Eat and drink, he says, and enjoy your life and your work while you are alive. Because this mortal life, he says, is all you have.

There is truth in what Ecclesiastes says. There is wisdom there – to appreciate the gifts God gives us in life, to take satisfaction in the present, and not to live in misery trying to acquire more, or worrying about what the future may bring.

But whenever I read Ecclesiastes, I really feel the need for the context of other parts of Scripture, as well – especially the New Testament! The author's whole worldview is so deeply colored by the fact that he did not know the resurrection of Jesus – by his belief that there is nothing after you die.

He's very explicit. "Enjoy life," he says, "with the wife whom you love, all the days of your fleeting life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or

wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.” Here are the words of a man who wants to savor the gifts of God, but has no hope of eternal life.

I was listening to a parenting podcast this week, and I listened to an episode about parents struggling to talk to their children about death. This is a universal challenge, but I was really struck by *why* this was so hard for most of the parents calling into the podcast. The parents did not know what to say, and some of their children were profoundly frightened of death. And the prevailing reason that there was no real comfort that these parents could offer their children, was because they didn’t believe there was anything after death.

These parents seemed, for the most part, to have come to terms with the finality of death. Or perhaps just become practiced at not thinking about it. But many of their children did not have that peace, or that practice at ignoring their terror of death. Many were fixated on it, and frightened. And it was heartbreaking and tragic to hear their stories.

And I thought, this *really is* the greatest gift that Jesus offered.

Jesus gives us, in his own, physical, resurrected body, the promise that death really isn’t the end. He promises us that we do continue after death. That our souls live on. That there are new, beautiful experiences and even adventures that we can look forward to. That we will be with our loved ones again.

Jesus’ life and teachings offer all kinds of good things. He teaches us how to pray. He teaches us to love and serve the weak and vulnerable, the oppressed and suffering among us. He names sin and calls us away from it. He gives us the gift of his presence in the sacraments. These are gifts we should of course not overlook or take for granted.

But really, the gift that changes everything is his death and resurrection. Eternal life is not only an immeasurable, incredible gift, but it’s a gift that changes the whole experience of our mortal lives. Jesus’ resurrection can lift away the looming fear of death that so often torments humans, who are burdened not only with mortality but with the knowledge of our mortality.

In listening and feeling my heart break for these children (and their parents) who live in such fear of death, I came to better understand the gift of Christ. I, too, have felt that fear, have had times of doubt whether there was really anything after death. In those times, even more than my own death, I feared the permanent loss of loved ones. It’s a horrible, empty-feeling fear.

And it’s so easy to fall into the habits of living like death really is the end – to live fearfully, to turn inward and try to hoard the brief time and limited resources we have.

But I do believe that we continue. That our souls persist right past death. That our lives continue with God on the other side of mortality. And believing that, and seeing how much it makes my worldview different than those who don’t believe that - who grieve, and have no hope - I understand why so much Christian writing, including the Nicene Creed we are about to speak, jumps so quickly to Resurrection.

When we say the Creed, we speak of Jesus’ birth, and in the next line of his death and resurrection. Some criticize the lack of language about Jesus’ earthly ministry, but I think I understand the impulse that caused Christians forming this creed to want to rush straight into the best good news. Speak of Resurrection first! And then watch how it changes everything else.

Unburdened from the fear of death, Christians have done incredible things. In the earliest days, they astonished their pagan persecutors by their willingness to die rather than deny Christ. Christians have served in plague conditions from those earliest days, risking and laying down their lives to give some comfort to the dying. They have stayed and served war-torn communities. They have given extravagantly, and lived in poverty and simplicity.

Listen even to the way language changed with the resurrection of Jesus. Paul, in today's letter, tells the Colossians: "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." There is no fear of death in the apostle Paul – he risked and experienced stoning, beatings, shipwreck, prison, and martyrdom because he couldn't not tell people about the resurrection of Jesus. Because it changed everything in his life, and he would rather die than have those around him not know the hope of immortality that they were offered.

The resurrection of Christ is not the only way humans have made peace with death. Other faiths offer different promises. Agnostics and atheists can live lives of selfless service and lay down their lives courageously.

But what an awesome way Christ offers – not just to accept death but to overcome it – to believe that death has no permanent power, and to have the resurrected life of Jesus himself as evidence that this is so.

We have this incredible gift of hope. It brings us each to the baptismal font, where we say that we are *buried* and raised again with Christ. When we are baptized, we unite our lives to Jesus, at the moment of his baptism, and at the moment of his death, and at the moment of his resurrection. We merge the path of our lives with the path of his life, so that we can say that just as we will die, like Jesus did, so too we will have a resurrection like his.

And this is something to remind ourselves of every day. Something we must practice believing and allow to shape our lives. Something we must tell our children, and our loved ones, and maybe even strangers around us, so that they do not have to live in terrible fear, but can live in hope. Because the God who created life, who blesses us with joy and love in this fleeting mortal life, created eternity as well. And that contains enough joy and love to fill this life and the next.

Amen.