

Sermon for September 1, 2019 – “A Time for Perspective”

22nd Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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Ever been to a corn maze? For those that may not know, a corn maze is exactly what the name implies; it's a maze cut out of a corn field. I went to a few of these back in my youth ministry days. They were fun – until you get lost. I remember one near Frederick, Maryland and it was HUGE! It didn't take me very long to get lost and I think at one point I started calling for help! This was before we went on the haunted hayride! If you look at the maze from the outside, the perimeter, it looks like a harmless old corn field. Of course, it's very different when you view it from smack dab in the middle – from the inside – trying to find your way out. And the view's even more different if you're in a helicopter overhead, or looking at it through an aerial app like Google Earth. Then you'd see the maze cut into the corn and the whole entire route.

Three different locations lead to three different perspectives. This idea of three different perspectives is helpful when looking at our reading from Ecclesiastes. In order to appreciate the wisdom of what “the Teacher” presents, we'd do well to see it from the **outside**, for a **positive** perspective; from the **inside**, for a **negative** perspective and from **up-above**, for an **ultimate** perspective.

First, the outside:

From the outside taking the text “as is,” without getting too deeply into it, everything looks pretty safe. Pretty positive. We find ourselves humming the catchy little 1960's folk song, “*Turn, Turn, Turn*,” written by Pete Seeger and made famous by the musical group The Byrds. I imagine most of you are familiar with it, with most of its lyrics taken directly from the Bible. Both that song and the outside perspective we're talking about here, focus on how there are different times for different experiences in our life. There's a right time to work and a time to spend time with family. There's a time to embrace and a time to keep your hands to yourself. Even in conservative Christian circles, there's a right time to dance.

When looking at the outside perspective, we acknowledge the wisdom of these different and varied times. It challenges the assumption that if we're spiritual enough, we ought to be happy all the time. It helps us realize that when we've lost someone to death, divorce, Alzheimer's or cancer, there's a time to weep. We acknowledge that there's a time to scatter stones, to tear down walls and a time to hate things like cancer, human trafficking, hypocrisy.

Often, the difficult thing about life is that we don't necessarily know which times are which. Say you have a friend who's betrayed you and hurt you very badly. Is it time to end that friendship or to try to heal it? Say there's a person in your family who is absolutely making a bad decision about something. Do you speak up and run the risk of harming that relationship or do you remain silent, maintain that relationship and risk having some harm come to that family member? Not easy questions, are they?

The point of the taking an outside perspective is that it offers a certain degree of wisdom in that it affirms the importance of the balance and the discernment of different times and seasons.

That's the outside perspective.

Second, the inside:

Now we look inside, going deeper into the text, surrounding ourselves with it. From this perspective, the world isn't so positive and even less neat and tidy. Internally, the author of Ecclesiastes seeks to understand life. He wants to know how to, as philosopher and Christian apologist Peter Kreeft put it, "avoid getting all 'A's' in all my subjects, but end up flunking life?" So, the Teacher explores every pleasure, every bit of wealth and power, work and social service, even a basic kind of religion. Everything people say makes life meaningful. He comes up with same conclusion actor Jim Carrey did. In an interview with *Reader's Digest* in 2006, Carey said, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of, so they can see that it's not the answer." That is precisely what the book of Ecclesiastes is all about. All the money and power. All the work and folly. All the pleasure and pain. None are the answer. None. Not even time.

In the context of the whole of chapter three of the Book of Ecclesiastes, our text almost sings a dirge in an attempt to demonstrate that even time itself is meaningless. How? Well, first of all, the passage presents time as circular with no progress being made. You laugh, then you weep, then you laugh again. You tear down, then build back up, only to tear down again. Over and over and over again. Pete Seeger and the Byrds sang it right, "*Turn, Turn, Turn.*" Time is a spiraling maze, turning, turning back on itself, a vicious cycle leading nowhere. Just endless repetition.

As the Teacher writes in chapter one, "**Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north, round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.**" The author – the Teacher – finally throws up their hands and says, "**What do workers gain from their toil?**" In other words, "What's the point of any of this? It's all meaningless. Utterly meaningless. Every tick of our clock, every activity under the sun is meaningless.

Did you catch that? The phrase, "**under the sun**"? That's the key to understanding this. It appears thirty-seven times in this small book of Ecclesiastes. It means a world without God in the picture. The Teacher is seeing a world where there's nothing above the sun.

A great many philosophers believed this and described life as nothing but a joke. Philosopher Albert Camus believed that, "The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth." He wrote that "Man stands face-to-face with the irrational. He feels within him the longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." In his famous song *All Along the Watchtower*, Bob Dylan wrote that "There are many here among us, who feel that life is but a joke." A joke. A sick, bad joke, as Shakespeare's Macbeth laments "...told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

This is a kind of nihilism that's easy to fall prey to and what the text seems to be talking about when viewed from the inside perspective. And to some extent it's true, especially if we try to live without God, or with God only on the periphery. Even so, and we all know that this is true, there are times when it seems that all the time we spend: time on relationships, our appearance, our pleasure, our pain, our work, our play, count for nothing. None of it. Not one second of time counts. Every tick of the clock is empty. The Teacher seemed to know this. He undertook great projects. He denied himself nothing his eyes desired. He refused his heart no pleasure. His heart took delight in all his labor. Yet when he surveyed all his hands had done and what he'd toiled to achieve, "...everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

Third, above:

So where does this leave us? Do we find ourselves lost in that Corn Maze of Life? Bereft of hope? Crushed under the weight of despair and angst? The teacher seemed to think so, writing in verse ten that **"I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race."** But then he seems to make an abrupt about face and leaves us with a cleft of hope, in the remarkable verse that follows. Referring to God he wrote that **"He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart."** In this verse, the Teacher opens a window above the sun. A window to heaven. A window that offers a different perspective on life; the third perspective. The perspective from up-above. The ultimate perspective. From that perspective we see God making everything beautiful in its time. We see God setting eternity in our hearts. But what does that mean? What does "eternity set in our hearts" mean? As the Teacher learned, who many believe was actually King Solomon, material things, worldly pleasures and achievements, can never fill the emptiness in our hearts. So, what can? St. Augustine put it so well when he prayed, "You have made us for Yourself, O God and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You." French scientist and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, also said it well: "There is a god-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus."

This is part of what I believe makes us human. It's what makes humans so unique and so extraordinary. We are, you see, created to be self-aware, created to know God. We are made in His image. God has put eternity in our hearts. C.S. Lewis said, "Our Heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but He takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home." There is a longing for home. There is a cry deep in every human heart for more than this life offers. It is a cry for home. A cry for God.

Ecclesiastes, viewed from its three perspectives, moves us from common grace to special grace. We've seen the positive; that there's time for everything. We've seen the negative, that all time under the sun is meaningless. And we've seen the ultimate, that there is One Above who is ultimately what we are yearning for and why nothing else, by comparison, can satisfy or offer meaning.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, Solomon (the Teacher) for all his wisdom did not have all the answers. Nor do we. We're far too quick to believe when things are going horribly wrong that this must be the new normal. It's easy to look at one snapshot and believe it's the whole story. At the same time, we know that God has a purpose. We know that God is in control even when it may not seem like it. We know that by trusting in God we can, by faith, as Paul exhorted the Philippians, **"...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose."** We can learn to live with the seeming contradictions that seem to be everywhere. We can learn to live with the unanswered questions that seem to complicate our life of faith. We can do this so that we may **"become blameless and pure,"** as Paul wrote, **"Children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then [we] will shine among them like stars in the sky, as [we] hold firmly to the word of life. And then [we] will be able to boast on the day of Christ that [we] did not run or labor in vain."**

Jesus said we must have faith like that of a child. A little child in their parent's arms does not need to know all that they know. The child can rest contentedly, trusting in the wisdom of their parents. Such is the life of faith in every season of life. We can learn to live by faith, content in every situation and circumstance of life under heaven.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.