

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 5, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

Scripture Readings

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 12:1-7, 13-14

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut – when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low – they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets – before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

James 2:1-10, 14-18

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored

the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

Mark 7:31-37

Then [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Hymn: *LSB 762, There Is a Time For Everything*



1 There is a time for ev - 'ry - thing, A
2 A time to hold, then be a - lone, A
3 E - ter - nal Lord, Your wis - dom sees And
△ 4 Be - fore all time had yet be - gun, You,



time for all that life may bring: A time to plant, a
time to gath - er scat - tered stone, A time to break, a
fath - oms all life's trag - e - dies; You know our grief, You
Fa - ther, planned to give Your Son; Lord Je - sus Christ, with



time to reap, A time to laugh, a time to weep,
time to mend, A time to search and then to end,
hear our sighs— In mer - cy, dry our tear - stained eyes.
time-less grace, You have re - deemed our time - bound race;



A time to heal, a time to slay, A
A time to keep, then throw a - way, A
From e - vil times, You bring great good; Be -
O Ho - ly Spir - it, Par - a - clete, Your



time to build where rub - ble lay, A time to die, a
time to speak, then noth - ing say, A time for war till
neath the cross, we've safe - ly stood. Though dim - ly now life's
time - ly work in us com - plete; Blest Trin - i - ty, Your



time to mourn, A time for joy and to be born,
ha - treds cease, A time for love, a time for peace.
path we trace, One day we shall see face to face.
praise we sing— There is a time for ev - 'ry - thing!

Sermon

Today we turn to Ecclesiastes, one of the most cynical books of the Bible. I know some people don't care for it because it presents a fairly bleak outlook on the world. It's made its way into a few cultural references you may remember: there's the song recorded by The Byrds back in the 1960s, "Turn Turn Turn" which is based on part of today's text. There's also an Agatha Christie mystery novel titled "Evil Under the Sun" which also takes its name from a verse here.

If you recognize one verse from it besides The Byrds lyrics, there's a good chance it's this: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity! What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" Everything is vanity, everything is useless and temporary. The word "vanity" there is like a morning mist, a vapor without any real substance that quickly evaporates away and leaves no trace. That's what Ecclesiastes says that everything in this world is like: it's all ultimately meaningless and futile.

Maybe I'm a little more cynically inclined, but I actually really like this book. I even find it rather comforting -- maybe I'm a little strange, but as we go on, I hope I can explain that to you. But first, we need to understand the context. The first chapter says this was written by "the Preacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem." Traditionally that's assumed to be Solomon himself; though his name isn't mentioned, he's a son of David who was king in Jerusalem, and he also had that reputation for wisdom. The tradition among the Rabbis was that Solomon wrote this towards the end of his life, reflecting back on everything: his wisdom, his power, his riches, and so forth. Clearly Solomon is reflecting on his twilight years and what is coming soon: he writes, "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

What he does in this book is go through just about every aspect of life on earth and consider it from two points of view: the earthly perspective, and the Godly perspective. He considers all the false alternatives to God that most often occupy human attention, and he rejects them all in turn. In this, you could say that Solomon speaks with authority, because of all that he had and experienced in his life. He had the opportunity to sample and evaluate just about everything that people think might make them happy. Wisdom? Yes, I had great wisdom and knowledge... But still, I will die and lose it all. Pleasure? Yes, I had every opportunity for pleasure in my life; wine and women and song, gold and servants and palaces... But still, I will die and lose it all. Work? Yes, I worked hard and saw it pay off; I built a huge, prosperous kingdom; I achieved great success in my work... But still, I will die and lose it all.

He takes every aspect of life "under the sun" as he puts it, and considers it all, and yet he always comes back to the same point: whether you've lived well or badly, we all end up in the same place. As Isaiah wrote, mankind is like grass and flowers which wither and fade and pass away. The only thing that remains is God. And that is because all this bleak cynicism is looking at the world "under the sun," the world apart from God and the meaning He gives to it. Apart from God, it is all useless, it is all vanity and meaningless.

But Solomon also affirms that the flip side is true: when you bring God into the picture, that gives meaning to the world. Only when seeing all this through God does it make sense. Only by faith does the apparent meaninglessness of life and the world come into focus. Through God, we find enjoyment in our work and meaning in our lives. Through God, we see the big picture. Ecclesiastes is not a bleak, hopeless view of the world: rather, it is breaking down all the idols and the ungodly pursuits to which people devote themselves, to show how meaningless it all is without God.

You can pursue wealth, but without Godly stewardship it is ultimately worthless -- you can't take it with you. You can pursue wisdom and knowledge, racking up endless advanced degrees and certifications, but it goes away when you go. You can pursue power and respect, running for office or seizing authority, but no king or president, no nation or government will last forever. Just look at the ancient ruins in Egypt: these absolutely massive statues of long-dead kings, impressive in their size but utterly irrelevant to anyone's life for millennia. Roman Emperors claimed to be gods on earth, yet now they're little more than a footnote in a history book. You can pursue pleasure, trying to find what will make you happy: the right hobby, the right spouse, the right possessions, the right whatever. We bounce from one to the next in that search, searching and sampling to find something that will stick, that will keep us happy.

In the end, it will all be meaningless without the eternal perspective and eternal security that comes only from God, that comes only by grace through faith. And that's the conclusion we heard here in Ecclesiastes, right here at the end of the book: the entire duty of mankind is to fear and obey God. That's the end of the matter. Fear God: that is, have faith. Keep His commandments: obey Him. That is simply the first commandment, to fear, love, and trust in God above all other things. Ecclesiastes is a beautifully written and powerful attack on all the idols of the world, and from that, a reminder to keep God where He belongs, at the center.

As I said, I find this book almost comforting, and I think the reason is because it is such a good source of perspective. And while it offers this empty, meaningless picture of life apart from God, it also offers a glimpse into a meaningful and satisfied life through faith in God. Solomon laments how youth gives way to the pains and hardships of old age, then finally a return to the dust -- death, which is the wages and the result of sin. But thanks be to God that He has overcome death for us through Jesus! Thanks be to God that He has remedied all the problems Solomon describes, that He has made it all worthwhile! Life is indeed meaningless -- unless it is lived in right relationship with God, through our faith in Christ.

When we do that, our eyes are opened to see the immense meaning and satisfaction and joy of this world. When we do that, we are not bothered by all the vain efforts of those who still think that earthly power or pleasure will actually mean anything in the end. Jesus sums up the same message as Ecclesiastes in this brief way: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

A realistic view of life will certainly recognize that it's not all sweetness and light. But even in the hardships, in good times and bad, it all makes sense when we look at it through the lens of Christ. The spirit belongs to God who gave it, and there is a time for everything because it is all in the hand of God. This is a book of contrast: on the one hand, whatever human beings can do will eventually crumble and fall and pass away. On the other hand, as it says in chapter 3, "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him."

Whatever God does, endures forever. And God has come to save us from this futility of living in a fallen, broken world, to show us the big picture and the eternal promise. If you try to make sense of the world apart from a view filled with faith and centered on Jesus, it will never truly satisfy you.

But with those Christ-colored glasses, with that Christ-centered vision, we look at the world and our lives and we do find joy and peace in the gifts of God: the gifts we have right now, in our lives and work, our vocations and relationships, in loving God above everything else and in loving our neighbors as ourselves. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is what brings true peace and contentment. "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

We see in the book of Acts that the earliest Christians referred to their faith as "the Way," a phrase used several times in Acts. In fact, they saw that there were two Ways: there is the Way of Life, and there is the Way of Death. What the Preacher of Ecclesiastes lays out is the Way of Death, a life lived without God, and he pushes us to pursue the Way of Life instead. And the Way of Life is nothing other than Jesus, to believe in him, to follow him, to heed his words and walk in his ways.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.