

God endures forever. A sermon from a series on Ecclesiastes, January 29, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George. Preached by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: ECCLESIASTES 3:9-15

JOHN 1:10-14

A few months ago , there appeared on my Facebook site a picture of a yellow octagonal “Dead End” sign.

At the bottom of the sign someone had spray-painted the words “What Isn’t?”

I did not think it particularly funny then. I still do not think so now.

I thought, what a sad commentary on daily life Cynical, negative with no hope.

And yet...for how many people, even those who say they are Christians is this graffiti sign reflective of their own view of life as they live it out now?

I wonder how many of us

How many of those around us say betimes – what’s the purpose

What’s the use?

What has been gained?

Where is it all going?

I wonder if this is but one reason
Ecclesiastes is such a troublesome and troubling
book for many.

For Ecclesiastes forces us, as we hear and reflect on
his words to take a look at what WE think is
important,

What the WORLD around us tells us is very
important and fulfilling

OVER WHAT Ecclesiastes says is really of lasting
value in this life and beyond it.

We may not like what Ecclesiastes says, so
perhaps we like behave like Scarlett O'Hara.

You remember Scarlett O'Hara from Margaret
Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*,

And played by Olivia De Havilland in the 1939 film.
Whenever something happened to Scarlett that she
did not agree or like,

Her stock reply was "I just can't think about that
right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that
tomorrow."

If you remember the story, Scarlett never gets
around to thinking about the difficult and
troublesome "its".

Make no mistake; this book of Ecclesiastes is
for us

If we want to live a life that matters;

A life that has meaning and purpose – and do all
not want to live such a life?

Then, Ecclesiastes' counsel continues to stand the test of human experience.

Vs9 begins with a question – **What gain have the workers from their toil?**

An honest and carefully considered question – in the light of what the Preacher has just written – the 8 pairings of life experience.

What follows from vs 9 on and it goes beyond the end of the reading Jessica did – might be described as an interlude – yet one full of insight.

Remember,

The Preacher is building a case.

Only God can provide ultimate meaning and purpose in each of our lives.

In the final chapter of his book, Ecclesiastes will make this statement, this affirmation abundantly clear.

But before he does, he will lay before his readers – then and now – all the things and experiences they may think give ultimate meaning and purpose in our lives – wealth, possessions, power, success, knowledge.

One by one, the Preacher will hold up each of these things – think this is the way to ultimate happiness and meaning – then verbally crumple or tear them up.

That's where the Preacher is going, and he's brilliant in his persuasive abilities.

What gain have the workers from their toil?

Well, says Ecclesiastes if we continue to live “under the sun” – limit our vision and mindset to the horizontal,

Living on the basis of what we know, see, hear, and taste, what we ourselves can do – little, if any gain!

From verse 10 onward, the Preacher introduces the essential importance of the vertical

For in these verses – who is the subject? GOD

The Preacher is reminding his readers then and now
Our problem is that we tend to focus too much of our attention on the wrong thing.

One result of this is we have a very narrow view, perspective and understanding of our lives.

Do not just look around you

Look to God.

Long view

Bigger picture

How so?

If we only look along the horizontal, we only see the immediate,
 We see today.

However, God is working on forever.

We focus on the external

God emphasizes the internal.

¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. (vs.11)

It is this truth that Paul picks up in the latter part of chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans.

It's a favorite and perspective giving truth I continue to both need and am encouraged by

²⁸We know that all things work together for good^{la} for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (vs.28)

God makes 'everything' beautiful in his time – including our losses,

Our hospital experiences, our failures, our brokenness, and our battles – emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual;

Our fragmented dreams; our loss romances; our heartaches, our illnesses – even our terminal illnesses.

Ecclesiastes would not say **everything**

In vs. 11 if he did not mean '**everything**'.

It is a very hard promise to accept is it not?

It may sound horribly callous and unfeeling

For some who hear these particular verses from Ecclesiastes and Romans – it may only confirm their misconception of God as some sort of divine "Terminator" targeting us with relentless oppression.

Or God as divine tyrant intent on keeping us in a continued state of fear, anxiety and terror.

That is just not the case

As we begin to reflect upon how with God front and centre of our lives, our perspective broadens, Consider the following question:

From which life experiences have you become stronger, more humble, more caring, more compassionate, more sensitive to the preciousness and fragility of life and less judgmental?

The happy or not so happy experiences...

I do not pretend to speak for any of you.

Just consider the question

From which life experiences have you become stronger, more humble, more caring, more compassionate, more sensitive to the preciousness and fragility of life and less judgmental?

For myself,

I have learned and continue to learn much in the happy experiences of life – among them the ability to laugh at myself.

However, though I never eager await them,

Nor am I terribly pleased when they come – I must admit it is the *not so happy experiences* that have been the greater teachers.

Some still cause pain, sighs, anger and tears

Yet as I look back,

Think about such times, it is these not so happy times from which I have learned and am learning

still very important lessons in living a life that matters.

It is from these times that I am reminded most often today of the nearness of the presence of the Risen Christ.

Well, WHAT DOES Ecclesiastes say about the difference of God being front and centre in our lives?

We are given a sense of the eternal (vs.11)

As humans we are endowed with the facility to step back from immediate situations and particular events that vie it seems for our full attention and more

And catch a glimpse of a bigger, wider picture

It is this facility that allowed St. Paul to say,

¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly,^[a] but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.(vs.12)

It is this facility that allowed St. John in his Revelation to say in the 21st chapter of his letter

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.

He will dwell^[b] with them;

they will be his peoples,^[c]

and God himself will be with them;^[d]

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.' (vs.3-4)

It is what enables me to say to myself when
confronted by malice, vengefulness, short-
sightedness, evil, injustice, unfairness and other
such things – “someday”

No matter what I am feeling, seeing,
experiencing or others around me are experiencing,
there is a divine presence in the midst of the
madness!

God continues to hold the torn pieces of our lives.

God's time is not our time

His is the big picture, the long view

And because he is a gracious, loving, generous and
caring Creator,

I am prepared to commit the matter of

unpleasantness, pain, unhappiness,

disappointment, despair, discouragement into His
hands and let Him help me deal with it!!

We do not know the end do we?

We do not even know for certain what tomorrow
will bring.

We can certainly make plans for tomorrow, this
week coming, the month of February,

And beyond,

But in essence, we are only given the moment, the
now.

True?

So Ecclesiastes would say – stop living in the past,
 Stop living ahead of what is, lest you miss the wonder and awe of the now!!

What an important reminder that is, for so many people unnecessarily mortgage the present because they are dwelling in the what were's – nostalgia and too concerned with the might be's, could be's.

With God front and centre of our lives,
 Ecclesiastes says

2 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

It is the Preacher's Call to enjoy life because God is not only in control,
 The one who determines,
 The primary actor in the drama,
 But also because God has also given some very important gifts

We are given *the ability to rejoice and enjoy life* (vs. 12a)

Believers have the perspective and hope needed to sustain a life of joy, regardless of their circumstances.

Again, the best known practitioner of this was the apostle Paul.

Generations of believers have taken both encouragement and hope from Paul's words in the Philippian letter

12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:12-13)

We are given *the appetite to enjoy and savour what we eat and drink (13a)*

In other words, the ability to enjoy our food. Yet how often do we see eating and drinking like a pit stop where we pause only for a moment, get filled up and then we're off again. We are in danger of losing our ability to linger and thus enjoy and savour.

We are given the facility *to see God in all our labour (13b)*

I have long been a devotee of Brother Lawrence whose dates are 1610-1691 and whose best known book is The Practice of the Presence of God.

All labour said the Brother was holy.

Nearness to God,

The presence of God could be found doing work in the kitchen (which Brother Lawrence loathed) as in the study of the scriptures.

It depends only on one's heart resolutely determined to apply itself to nothing but God and to love God only.

The Preacher then focuses on *what God does*
(vs.14-15)

God's works says the Preacher are *permanent* (14a)
They will endure when everything else passes
away.

God's works and promise are *thorough and complete*
(vs.14b)

They never lack anything, nor are they empty, banal
or vacuous

Furthermore, God performs things, does things, and
accomplishes things that cultivate our respect for
Him.

**God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before
him,**

AWE and AWESOME are certainly much overused
words today

But there is no better word in its original meaning
and intent to describe what must always remain our
approach before and attitude to God

God is wholly Other and wholly sovereign.

Our awe comes not as a result of force or
terror, but rather from an acute awareness of our
humanness in comparison to God's infinite
wisdom, love, care, concern, forgiveness and grace
for each of us.

**That which is, already has been; that which is to be,
already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. (Vs, 15)**

God's invitation to expand our view to include the vertical in our lives and how we live them remains open-ended.

This is not just a promise to Ecclesiastes' first readers but to every generation who continue to hear the Preacher's words....

Question then,,, How then shall each of us live in a life that truly matters? AMEN