

Kohelet/Ecclesiastes: Rest and UnRest in Silence

A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

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Readings

Peter Kreeft from *Three Philosophies of Life*:

I have a friend who camps in the Maine woods each summer. One day he met an old hermit who had not lived in “civilization” for forty years. He seemed uncannily wise... and when my friend asked him where he got his wisdom, he pulled from his pocket the only book he had had for forty years. It was a tattered, yellow copy of Ecclesiastes. Only Ecclesiastes. That one book had been enough for him. Perhaps “civilization” is so unwise because nothing is ever enough for it. The old hermit had stayed in one place, physically, and spiritually, and explored its depths; civilization, meanwhile, had moved restlessly on, skimming over the surface of the great deeps. While civilization was reading the Times, he was reading the eternities.

From Ecclesiastes or Kohelet – The Jewish Publication Society translation

And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly;
Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.
The wise man, his eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness. And I also perceived that one event happeneth to them all.
Then said I in my heart: 'As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise?' Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.
So I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.
For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts;
All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all return to dust.
Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face is changed.
There is no man that hath power over the wind to retain the wind; neither hath he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in war;
neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it.
All things come alike to all;
there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked;
to the good and to the clean and to the unclean;
to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not;
as is the good, so is the sinner, and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.
I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.
He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

Sermon

To everything there is a season – the song goes. I used to hear it as a kid and wonder why there had to be a season of war or a season of hate – why there had to be the bitter times as well as the joyful times. I always heard the song in the context of some peace effort, sung by liberal role models. I can't remember how old I was when, raised as I was by secular, Jewish parents, I finally learned that the lyrics were from the Bible. We never cracked a Bible in my house. For all the hundreds of books we had I never saw a Bible there and there seemed to be a kind of scorn for those who did have or who opened Bibles. After all, “those” people – whoever they were – called it “The Book” and were clearly ignorant of everything that had been written since its time. Ignorant. So imagine my surprise, as I slogged through the whole Hebrew Bible for the first time to discover that there was a book that spoke directly to me and for me! It was I that I had been ignorant indeed. There is a time for everything – a time to be clueless and a time to study. There are a range of responses to the study of the Bible – from believing that it is the literal word of God – and every word must be taken literally to finding that the Bible is a book full of inconsistencies and self-contradictions, edited by men -- to wanting to dismiss the Bible altogether because the guidance for life is not only outdated – but the ideas are so awful and paint such a bleak portrait of humanity. In this place each one of us has the right and freedom to wrestle with the Bible – or even to ignore it – as long as we do not judge one another for our choices – and that whatever choice we make reflects our yearning for the best for humanity and the highest of our principles, values, and beliefs. I say that – but, in fact, I want to share with you this book. In fact, as I engage the Bible – for all its flaws and even its evils – I recognize that it is worthy of our engagement – both critical and admiring.

Ecclesiastes is the name often given to this book –the original Hebrew is Qohelet which means the orator – though when the word is translated into the Latin – as Ecclesia it is more about the religious nature of the assembly – where Qohelet does not imply the sort of gathering taking place. This is important because this is a book of philosophy. It was written at a time when there was a growing influence in Judaism from the Hellenic philosophers in Greece. So I ask you to go back, in your imagination, to around 300 before the common era – that's about when – from the writing style – this was created. Although the text is attributed to Solomon – it can't have been that King because he'd lived and built his temple at least 600 years before that. So, instead of the time of Solomon and the optimistic building of the first temple, imagine yourself in a time of upheaval in the region. There are multiple enemies of Israel and, likely an occupation. The Egyptian exile is long past – perhaps five hundred years. I ask you to imagine yourself in the ancient past. You're at the marketplace and a crowd is gathering around a speaker at the far end of the square. His clothes are dusty from travel and are a little different – they carry the mark of faraway places. Perhaps places where he has travelled, or gifts from teachers from those places who gave him tokens of respect. Plato has been gone for a hundred or more years, but his teaching and the influence of Greek rationalism are being felt all around the Mediterranean. The Hebrews are particularly interested. It reflects a growing movement of discussion and argument in Judaism that will flower into the Rabbinical tradition. It's a bright, Mediterranean day – the light -- sharp and clear, the market bustling with people. Curious, you wander over to the place where the man is going to speak and find a place to set down your basket. He introduced himself – but you missed that. The people around him are quiet in expectation. So he begins –

הֶבֶל, הַכֹּל הֶבֶלִים, הֶבֶל. Hebel, hakol hebelim, hebel, Hebel, hebelim, hakol hebel. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Hebel! Since you know Hebrew you know that the man is not talking about looking with pride into a mirror – but looking at the world and seeing that life is in vain. In the Hebrew the word Hebel actually means something like a wild goose chase – or more literally – chasing after the wind. Clearly the man is some sort of philosopher. At first you resist – after all the grapes in your basket are juicy and delicious and you are looking forward to taking them home to your family – who are precious beyond words. But he is so interesting you hang around. You are going to miss the best bargains, that piece of cloth you wanted may be gone and the dinner may be started late – but none of that matters. You may have something to share with your family when you return, something to teach your children – a fresh way of looking at the world. At worst you'll be able to tell a story about the funny sad man who spoke at the marketplace.

He rambles some so it's hard to follow him – but his story is intriguing. It was a search for meaning through every route.

He pursued pure pleasure – food, drink, sexuality. He gave himself up to the pleasures of the flesh. He wore the softest clothes and ate the finest food. He loved the most beautiful women and men. He listened to music and had songs composed for him. But he found that it did not bring him joy – he enjoyed it – but it did not move him to true ecstasy or deep satisfaction – it did not make him feel closer to God nor more attuned to the meaning of life – ultimately, he saw – it would end.

He speaks of the pursuit of wealth – something you'll never know! He has had wealth and power. He had lands and possessions, all sorts of luxury and comfort. He had it all but he gave it up. And he went seeking for joy and meaning. He wanted to know the meaning of life.

Then he turned to wisdom – and he studied and mused and learned and knew so very much. He talks about the pursuit of knowledge – which he clearly prizes and has much of. He caught the spirit of learning that was culminating the great collection that was being installed in a new library in Alexandria, Egypt. Not just knowledge, did the speaker seek – but wisdom and insight. Without this the world would be a chaotic and terrible place – for wisdom generates goodness and mindful living. But the orator said – even this will not be enough to satisfy. He tells a story: This also have I seen as wisdom under the sun... there was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it; now there was found in it a man poor and wise, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.

The orator – Qohelet – shares that you can strive to live a virtuous life and bad things can still happen to you. As Qohelet says: There is a vanity which is done upon the earth: that there are righteous men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous--I said that this also is vanity.” The fact that the rain will fall upon the virtuous and the vicious alike made Qohelet despair even of wisdom.

There is a movement in life – like the turning of the seasons that reveals that we are not in control – times of suffering and times of joy, we live attempting to balance between these turnings..... Soloist

To everything there is a season... and Qohelet wants us to know that there is no guarantee of reward or punishment – except for our own sense of rightness our actions.

And the last straw – the last thing that makes life seem pointless to the speaker is that, finally, it ends and there is no knowing what comes after. All just hebel – chasing after wind. If you were just reading these words on papyrus you might give up all hope – certainly it sounds as though the man is building quite an argument for despair.

Yet, the Orator looks anything but glum. Finally, he affirms that life is good, it is a pleasure and a gift. We know that because we can and do enjoy it and perhaps that is a signpost. Since it is a gift, the speaker says, don't worry it or yourself to death. Live well and wisely, do right by others and take care of your self and those you love. Revel in your body, mind, and heart and pass on what you can of lasting value to your children.

With your head full of thoughts you gather your things and head toward home and the present day. With a modern mind you can look back at Qohelet and see that he was philosopher – unafraid to ask the hard questions and looking to experience and reason for answers. His thoughts reflect not only the influences of the Greek philosophers but also the influence of Egyptian and Mesopotamian philosophical tradition. There's even a Babylonian text called the Dialogue of Pessimism.

If you take the Hebrew Bible as a whole, it is rather a stark portrait of life – with deeply flawed heroes and bloody resolutions. Qohelet reflects this outlook. Rather than idealistic it is realistic. Qohelet says: “Folly is set on great heights, and the wise sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth. The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness; the end of his talk is grievous madness....yet man knoweth not what shall be; and that which shall be after him, who can tell him?” Qohelet could just as well be talking about modern cable journalism that slants the truth and props up idiocy as wisdom and ridicules wisdom as foolishness. When he says: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance, with increase; this also is vanity. Sweet is the sleep of a labouring man...but the satiety of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.” He could just as well be talking about wall street bonuses and the way that our economy is measured by consumption in our day. Critics have called Qohelet pessimistic but I fully disagree. He is simply willing to strip away rationalizations to face life on its own terms.

You know the story of Sisyphus – the man forced to roll a boulder up a hill day after day after day. Albert Camus, the existentialist revived the myth of Sisyphus to awaken humanity not to the meaninglessness of life – but to the responsibility of instilling meaning. For Camus – a couple thousand years after Qohelet – the meaning of life was up for grabs. For Camus, though, the philosopher who stews and steeps in his bleak outlook is simply wasting time and missing the point – life is here, now, and the world needs wise people in order to make it a good and

meaningful world. Camus once said that each person in her joys and sufferings builds for all. That each of our lives contributes to the store of meaning shared by us all. That was a bold assertion – Camus would be the man who decided one day to step briskly out of the way of the boulder and go on with life.

Qohelet was the first humanist existentialist. There are a few mentions of God in Qohelet – but they are devices more than real pointers. The strongest statement about God is in the closing words of the book: The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear G-d, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole man. For G-d shall bring every work into the judgment..., whether it be good or whether it be evil.” It is recognized by Biblical scholars that this passage is probably an addition made at a later time – perhaps a time when the rabbis were worried that such a skeptic would tempt others to skepticism. So they filled in their own answers. That hasn't been the case. Some Christians, Peter Kreeft, a theologian, among them, assert – that Qohelet was the question and Jesus was the answer. Like those bumper stickers: Jesus is the answer. Frankly – that depends upon who's asking what question. It demeans Jewish tradition as well as the history of philosophy by saying such a thing. Since the time of Qohelet and, actually, before, people have asked the question – what is the meaning of life when there are no guarantees, when there is only impermanence – what is the meaning of life when everything changes and all are bound to the same end? For some the answer may, indeed, be Jesus. About two hundred years before the time of Qohelet – and a good bit further to the East a man named Siddhartha asked the same questions – in fact his life remarkably resembled the life that Qohelet described – a wealthy man, a prince, leaves the protection of the palace and learns that life is impermanent, that there is unexplained suffering and that wealth cannot protect humanity from it.

He spent a long time exploring different answers to the question – what is the meaning of life – and ended with a great body of training for the mind so that people could, in fact, step out of the way of the boulder. He discovered that starving was not the answer, being poor or rich was not the answer, that all the study in the world could bring understanding but was not the answer. He found a middle way -- much like the one presented by Qohelet – do good and do no evil, live in balance, accept the world on its terms, leave it better than you found it and since this life has been given to you treat it as a gift. The Buddha recognized that life changes always like the seasons but there is a balance in the changing – a place where the change itself simply tells the seeker that life is happening and life is precious.

There was a time in college when I was sinking in despair on account of philosophy – my major. I loved it because it asked important questions. Still, I couldn't agree with the great philosophers. Each had different answers and all of them seemed like odd justifications. They were concerned with the meaning of life and were reasoning it away. And one day – as though the scales fell from my eyes – I saw that life, itself, was inherently worthy – we feel love and we treasure life – we suffer the losses that attend life. We cling to one another and to this world and we are often lifted to divine heights by the beauty of the world in which we live and our hearts are broken when we witness its suffering. I began to wonder if there wasn't a way that philosophy – just like religion had lost its way and begun to offer imperfect answers trying to avoid the very earthiness of life. For life is earthy and well as earthly. Dust to dust. But as

Muhammad Iqbal wrote: It is true that we are made of dust. And the world is also made of dust. But the dust has motes rising.

Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, is a worthy book – perhaps the worthiest in the Hebrew Scripture – because it asks the question that each person harbors in her or his soul and does so with a certain poetry but without any veil. Story after story has assaulted our minds and hearts by the time we reach Qohelet. We have seen the best and the worst in humanity – we have seen nations fall and rise and still the question remains – how and why do we live? God does not speak to Qohelet – God is silent in that book. For myself – I am just as glad. After all the God of the Bible breaks promises, hurts his people, is unpredictable, catastrophic – just like life itself. I see much of the Hebrew Bible as a place where the nature of God and life is the question – but finally the answer is in Qohelet – the answer is in life itself – in our own lives and love. It is in our own wisdom and enjoyment, in our short time on this world – which is a gift – according to Qohelet. The silence of God in Qohelet is significant – it signals the importance of ourselves in the question and we are left to answer it.

In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand; for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good. And the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun. For if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. Rejoice... in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes... Therefore remove vexation from thy heart...

We can use our intelligence to wall us off or we can all our faculties to live more deeply into the gift – with all its joys and sorrows. And we can chase after wind – and the wind itself is a blessing – because, after all, it is the breath of life.