

Sermon: In Its Time

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, January 1, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Let me begin today's message with a 'Happy New Year', on this Sunday of January 1, 2023. I hope you had a wonderful fun time celebrating the New Year's Eve last night. By the virtue of you being here this morning, as part of this worshipping community, I am, at the very least, assured that your fun time did not get too out of hand. I am also comforted, by the virtue of your presence here this morning, that you understand the importance of being right with God, of seeking God's blessings for you and your family, as we cross over the threshold from 2022 to 2023, at the dawn of a new year. Whatever tears or joy or courage or fear, whatever surprise or disappointment or failure or success you had experienced last year, 2022 is in the rearview mirror. 2023 is ahead of us; a brand new year, a clean slate for everyone, like marathon runners on the same starting line. Ready, set and off we go!

With a new year, comes the New Year Resolution—a popular pastime for people to set goals and expectations, hoping to improve oneself, to make positive changes to one's own life. There is nothing wrong with making resolutions. The problem has always been with the follow-through. Could one really hold fast to those goals and expectations, and persevere in their realization? Or would those resolutions be left be gather dust by the second week of January? You don't have to answer that, just something to be mindful of.

A more serious question that I would invite you to consider is this: does anything we do on earth makes a difference? What do we truly gain from our daily toil? That is the question under consideration, posed by the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes, in chapter 3.

The word 'Ecclesiastes' is actually the Latin transliteration of the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Koheleth* (קֹהֵלֶת). At the very first verse of the book, readers are introduced to this unnamed author, "*The words of the Koheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*" It is traditionally ascribed that Solomon was the author, writing at the tail end of his life, but that authorship has been disputed by critical scholarship. In any

case, the word *Koheleth* literally means someone who gathers and presides over an assembly. The word is most often translated in English as the Preacher.

The message of this preacher is not for the faint of heart. It opens with shocking statement, “*Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*” The actual Hebrew word used is *hevel* (הֶבֶל), or vapour. It is what comes out of one’s mouth in a short exhale, and it can mean figuratively something that is insubstantial, vain, futile or meaningless. If all things are indeed *hevel*, or vapour, then the logical question to ask is in the following verse, “*What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?*”

The Preacher returns to this same question in chapter 3:9, but he first sets it up with another bold statement in verse 1, “*to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven*”. He then presents 7 pairs of diametrically opposed activities on earth, and boldly states that there is a time for each and every one...a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted, and so on and so on. You get the picture.

I won’t spend too much time analyzing these activities today—they are fairly self-explanatory. But I do want to address the curious pair of gathering and throwing away stones. Biblical scholars have offer many explanations as to what they mean, and most seem to settle on the agricultural use of gathering stones to clear a field for planting, and of spreading stones on a field so an invading army would not be able to profit from a fertile land. I am not convinced of that explanation. To me, gathering stones is a gesture of judgement, of an imminent capital punishment; and throwing away stones is a gesture of forgiveness, of acknowledging that no one is truly fit to cast the first stone.

With the exception of to be born and to die, all these activities, the both extremes and everything that transpire in-between, seem to be (and I stress that only seemingly to be) under human agency, that is within our grasp, under our control. But who sets the appointed season for these activities? Who sets their appointed time?

Time is the great equalizer. From kings to peasants, Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, men or women, we all get the same amount of time, each day. Each day, we each get precisely 1,440 minutes, no more, no less. Think of time as a bank account. At the start of the day, the account is credited with \$1,440. You can spend it any which way you like,

but you cannot leave it unspent, nor could you save it into another account for the rainy days. It doesn't matter if you spend it wisely or foolishly, lavishly or gingerly, at the start of another day, voila, another \$1,440 in your account. It goes on and on, again and again, until it doesn't, and one has no knowledge of nor control over when it doesn't.

In this great equalizer of time, it is the *Koheleth's*, the Preacher's assertion that God sets the appointed time in its appointed season. God does not take away humankind's freewill. God does not take our ability to engage in every activities under heaven, but God simply sets their most appropriate time.

Furthermore, the *Koheleth* asserts that, in verse 11, God also puts eternity in our hearts. What does that actually mean? Here is where this passage get really confusing. There is an ongoing textual debate as to the meaning of the Hebrew word *olam* (אֲלֶמ). Most scholars view it as the defective form of *oolam* (אֲלֶמַי), that is 'eternity'. However, in the post biblical world, this defective form *olam* (אֲלֶמ) took on a more futuristic tone, of 'a world yet to come'. Such usage is attested in the Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and the King James Version. In such an understanding, God places in our hearts a sense of the future, a world yet to come, yet we do not comprehend it.

Are you with me so far? Good. Let me introduce you to a wonderful feature of the Hebrew text. In the earlier form of the Hebrew language, words were written with only consonants, no vowels. Depending on the context of the word, readers are to supply the vowels, thus providing meaning that is most suitable.

Let me give you an example, in English. The combination of the three consonants LVD, could mean 'loved' (the past tense of the verb to love), or 'lived' (the past tense of the verb to live), or 'livid' (describing someone who is quite angry). There are probably other combinations of LVD out there. It really depends on the context for one to decide which vowels make more sense.

The same thing is also happening here with the word אֲלֶמ. If we strip its vowels and supply it with a different set of vowels, let say *elem* (אֲלֶמ), we get a completely different word, which actually means darkness or ignorance. The thing is, this actually makes more sense. That is: God places ignorance or darkness in our heart, so that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. We see such translation of this verse in *The Message* and other newer versions of the Bible.

So what has God actually placed in our hearts? Is it eternity? Is it the knowledge of a future world? Or is it simply darkness and ignorance? We simply don't know for sure. But the one thing we do know, and we do trust and we do hope is that God is making everything beautiful in its time, in its time God makes all things beautiful. So we labour and toil on this earth. Another year has gone by, one more year lays ahead of us, if God is willing.

The message of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is to enjoy simple things in life, to eat and drink and be happy. He nevertheless concludes his preaching with a simple instruction to fear God, and to keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of of everyone.

I will conclude my preaching by leaving you with the words written down by the Apostle John in Revelation 21, of the new heaven and new earth, words spoken by the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the one who is seated on the heavenly throne:

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
he 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.
See, I am making all things new.”* (Revelation 21:3-5)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.