

EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Tonight is New Year's Eve. So last week, as I was thinking about this sermon, I asked a couple of my family members about New Year's resolutions. I didn't want to press them about their own, possibly confidential, resolutions, so I asked "What do you think are the most common kinds of resolutions that we Americans tend to make?" The first two offered were: 1) I'm going to diet and lose weight, and 2) I'm going to stop drinking, or at least drastically curtail how much I drink. A little further down the list was 3) I'm going to waste less time doing indulgently fun things like watching TV. But my sermonic advice to you today, taken straight from scripture, is "eat, drink, and be merry."

The Revised Common Lectionary – which prescribes which scripture readings are recommended for use in all Christian churches this Sunday – gives us the first half of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes to consider,ⁱ along with the story of Jesus' conversations with teachers in the temple in Jerusalem when he was only twelve.ⁱⁱ I will concentrate today on Ecclesiastes, knowing that Jesus was a good student of the Hebrew Scriptures and that his discussions with the teachers in the temple may well have included insights from Ecclesiastes. And, as it says in the last verse of today's reading, "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."ⁱⁱⁱ

This phrase is repeated in similar form four more times in this short biblical book.^{iv} Perhaps the most famous is in the eighth chapter: "So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people here under the sun than to eat, drink and be merry."^v It's often claimed that the

Greek Epicurus, a third century B.C. contemporary of the Jewish author of Ecclesiastes, first coined this phrase, adding, “for tomorrow we die.”^{vi} Of course, it’s from him that the term Epicurean is derived, as one who sees pleasure as the highest good.^{vii} But in fact it was the Jewish prophet Isaiah some five hundred years earlier^{viii} who said, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”^{ix} He used it in a more judgmental sense, though, of describing how residents of Jerusalem would act on the night before the city’s destruction.^x

Who was the author of Ecclesiastes, and why did he teach as he did? The very first verse of the book claims it was King Solomon, the great exemplar of wisdom in the Bible. Yet, Solomon lived in the tenth century B.C., and the lateness of the Hebrew language used in Ecclesiastes places it some seven hundred years later. Internally in the book the author is identified as a wise man or sage who had tremendous life experience and gave advice to those in the royal circle.^{xi} He claims to have had free access to wine, women and song, along with employment that brought him great wealth,^{xii}

However, the second sentence of the book reads: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”^{xiii} The Hebrew word being translated, *hebel*, occurs thirty-eight times in *Ecclesiastes*, which is about half of the total occurrences in the entire Bible. Its meaning has never been entirely clear, and it’s been translated into English not only as “vanity,” but also as “emptiness,” “futility,” “uselessness,” “vapor,” “breath,” “meaninglessness,” and absurdity.^{xiv} Ecclesiastes comes across at first reading as an incredibly cynical book. “Absurdity of absurdities! All is absurdity.”

Here are some of the specific ways the Teacher fleshes that out: “The person who loves money can never have enough...”^{xv} “What has happened will happen again, and what has done will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun....”^{xvi} “In much wisdom is much

vexation, and the more one knows, the more one has to suffer....”^{xvii} “The wise man is remembered no longer than the fool, for, as the passing days multiply, all will be forgotten. Alas, wise man and fool die the same death....”^{xviii} “Again, I considered all the acts of oppression here under the sun; I saw the tears of the oppressed, and I saw that there was no one to comfort them. Strength was on the side of their oppressors.”^{xix} “Bread does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor success to the skillful; time and chance govern all.”^{xx} And a great one for us here at Stanford University: “The use of books is endless, and much study is wearisome.”^{xxi}

This is the Bible? It’s no wonder that, from the beginning, serious efforts were made to exclude *Ecclesiastes* from the biblical canon, and now in the lectionary it makes only a rare appearance. Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of the bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,^{xxii} has called it “the most dangerous book in the Bible.”^{xxiii} He describes it as “the work of an angry, cynical, skeptical man who doubts God and questions the value of doing good.”^{xxiv} The main bible commentary I use gives it a slightly rosier gloss: “*Ecclesiastes* has always had its fans among the original thinkers of the Jewish and Christian communities: skeptics, people with a dark vision of reality, recovering alcoholics... On the whole, however, believers have found it at least baffling and at most wrongheaded.”^{xxv}

On the other hand, Rabbi Kushner in fact is so compelled by *Ecclesiastes* that he’s written an entire book on it, entitled *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*. He explains: “I first discovered the book of *Ecclesiastes* when I was about seventeen, and I loved it at first sight. I loved the author’s courage and honesty in attacking the orthodoxies of his time, pointing out the hypocrisy and exposing the shallowness of so much that passed for piety and wisdom in his day.”^{xxvi} As an adult, though, Kushner is attracted to *Ecclesiastes* in a different way, feeling

that it has a very important answer to the great existential questions of life. It's summed up in these verses: "Go, eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your clothes always be freshly washed and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy life with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted you here under the sun. Whatever is in your power to do, do with all your might."^{xxvii}

Here's some of how Kushner interprets those verses: "If logic tells us that life is a meaningless accident...don't give up on life. Give up on logic. Listen to that voice inside you which prompted you to ask the question [about the meaning of life] in the first place. If logic tells you that in the long run, nothing makes a difference because we all die and disappear, then *don't live in the long run*. Instead of brooding over the fact that nothing lasts, accept that as one of the truths of life, and learn to find meaning and purpose in the transitory, in the joys that fade. Learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever. In fact, learn to savor it *because* it is only a moment and will not last. Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting."^{xxviii}

There are those special moments – like hiking to the top of a mountain and being surprised by a spectacular view laid out before you, or a particular conversation that made you feel deeply loved, understood, and appreciated – which can make all the rest of the daily grind worthwhile.^{xxix} If we stop to smell the flowers on a daily basis and find the infinite in the small, common things, we can find heaven on earth in the moment. Kushner asks what life is all about, and responds that it is surely "not about writing great books, amassing great wealth, achieving great power." Instead, "It is about loving and being loved. It is about enjoying your food and sitting in the sun rather than rushing through lunch and hurrying back to the office. It is about

savoring the beauty of moments that don't last, the sunsets, the leaves turning color, the rare moments of true human communication. It is about savoring them rather than missing out on them because we are so busy and they will not hold still until we get around to them.”^{xxx}

I've often felt that the Zen Buddhist tradition teaches this critical lesson very well. It describes “mindfulness” as one of the keys to a meaningful life. For example, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh tells the story of sitting under a tree with an American friend and sharing a tangerine. As they talked about projects they would like to pursue in the future, his friend became so immersed in dreaming about the future that he forgot about what he was doing in the present: “He popped a section of tangerine in his mouth and, before he had begun chewing it, had another slice ready to pop into his mouth again. He was hardly aware that he was eating a tangerine.” So, Thich Nhat Hanh said, “You ought to eat the tangerine section you've already taken.” His friend was startled into realizing what he was doing. Thich Nhat Hanh explains: “It was as if he hadn't been eating the tangerine at all. If he had been eating anything, he was ‘eating’ his future plans. A tangerine has sections...If you can't eat a single section, you cannot eat the tangerine.” It's reported that his friend understood: “He slowly put his hand down and focused on the slice already in his mouth. He chewed it thoughtfully before reaching down and taking another section.”^{xxxi}

Similarly, in the Jewish Talmud, which is the collected wisdom of the early rabbis, it's written: “In the world to come, each of us will be called to account for all the good things God put on earth which we refused to enjoy.” Instead of denigrating the body and its appetites, as Kushner explains, there should be “a sense of reverence for the pleasures of life which God put here for our enjoyment. Like all gifts, of course, they can be misused.” But that would then be called gluttony or drunkenness or other classic vices like lust and covetousness. At that point the

enjoyment is drained back out of them. Of course there's a place for dieting and drinking less and not over-indulging as resolutions for the New Year.^{xxxii} But in the words of *Ecclesiastes*, it's the difference between meaningless plunging into pleasures,^{xxxiii} which is vanity, and partaking of God's creation with a sense of awe,^{xxxiv} which is the fulfillment of life.

So, while in the Teacher's view there may be no capital "A" Answer to the meaning of life, there are small "a" answers. Tonight "eat, drink and be merry" in this religious sense. If possible, enjoy the company of another person this New Year's Eve, and delight in the taste of each bite of food and each sip of a drink. As we enter the New Year, may we appreciate the simple pleasures like freshly washed clothes and hot showers and seeing one's work as craft, not drudgery. Instead of trying to solve the problem of living once and for all, may we learn to deal with it simply day by day. For it's a gift to be simple. It's a gift to be free.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13.
- ⁱⁱ Luke 2: 41-42.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ecclesiastes 3:13.
- ^{iv} Ecclesiastes 2:24, 5:18, 8:15, 9:7.
- ^v Ecclesiastes 8:15.
- ^{vi} *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), Vol. V, p. 303.
- ^{vii} *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 270.
- ^{viii} *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 433.
- ^{ix} Isaiah 22:13.
- ^x *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 276.
- ^{xi} *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V, pp. 271-272.
- ^{xii} Ecclesiastes 2: 4-10.
- ^{xiii} Ecclesiastes 1:2.
- ^{xiv} *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V, p. 278.
- ^{xv} Ecclesiastes, 5:10.
- ^{xvi} Ecclesiastes 1: 8-9.
- ^{xvii} Ecclesiastes 1:18.
- ^{xviii} Ecclesiastes, 2:16.
- ^{xix} Ecclesiastes, 4:1.
- ^{xx} Ecclesiastes 9:11.
- ^{xxi} Ecclesiastes 12:12.
- ^{xxii} Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981).
- ^{xxiii} Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), p. 31.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- ^{xxv} *The New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 267.
- ^{xxvi} Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, p. 37.
- ^{xxvii} Ecclesiastes 9: 7-10.
- ^{xxviii} Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. p. 141.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ^{xxxi} Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness! A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 5-6.
- ^{xxxii} Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, p. 82.
- ^{xxxiii} Ecclesiastes 2:1.
- ^{xxxiv} Ecclesiastes 3:14.