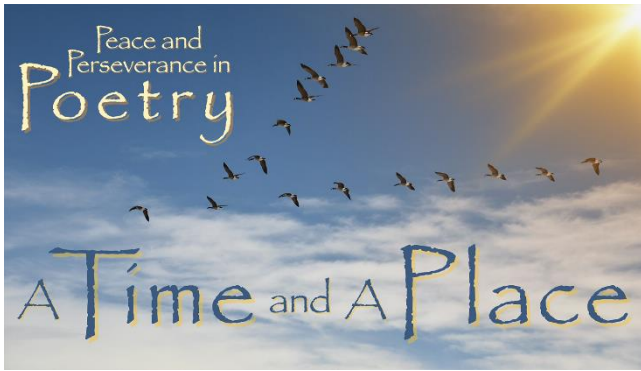




A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: August 17, 2025



Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 3:1-17

*The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?*

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever.

The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

*The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.*

*All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.
All things are wearisome; more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'?
It has already been, in the ages before us.
The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come
by those who come after them.*

Ecclesiastes 3:

*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 throw 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 throw 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.
What gain have the workers from their toil?
I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.
He 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.
I know that there is nothing better for them
than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live;
moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink
and take pleasure in all their toil.
I know that whatever God does endures for ever;
nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it;
God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.
That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is;
and God seeks out what has gone by.
Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness,
wickedness was there as well.
I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked,
for she has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.*

TODAY, IN OUR SERMON SERIES, WE'VE COME TO THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES. Now, what I'm about to share with you has proven to be utterly untrue, but some early biblical scholars used to say that Solomon wrote all three of these books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

And the general theory was this:

- that the Song of Songs was written in his youth, newly in love and in pursuit of romance. It is a poem about passion and desire (you'll find out more about that next week, but be warned: it's pretty steamy);
- whereas the book of Proverbs was written during his parenting days, seeking to impart his wisdom and knowledge to his children. Perhaps the parents of Calvary's class of 2025 understand this desire as their children prepare to leave for college. These 31 chapters are like a poetic version of yelling: "Make good choices," as your child runs out the door.
- And then there's Ecclesiastes, said to have been written during Solomon's older, perhaps more cynical days, after life had sobered him up a bit, and he could speak with complete candidness and a touch of pessimism.

Now, again, this theory is more than likely untrue. Solomon probably didn't write all these books. But I can see why people would believe this.

Ecclesiastes is a bit unhinged sometimes. Maybe you'd call it "tough love" or a reality check, but this book of the Bible just tells it like it is.

For instance, if you were to make the statement, "Life is hard." The Song of Songs might respond, "Yes, but falling in love is amazing!" Proverbs might say, "Yes. But if you live well with the fear of God, life can and *will* get better."

Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, says, "You think life is hard? Well, duh. That's because it is. And it doesn't get much better. No one really knows why, but that's just life. Good luck with that." Great, thanks, Ecclesiastes.

It's not necessarily the pastoral care or reassurance you seek to find in scripture.

What I love about Ecclesiastes, though, is that it is So. Darn. Real.

It fesses up to the fact that life *is* really hard, and we don't always know why.

And living life, if you do it well – with love, intention, and hope - means our hearts *will* break over and over again.

Ecclesiastes may seem cynical, may seem jaded or pessimistic, but it faces life head-on. It takes off the rose-colored glasses that tries to insist that life is fair, and instead says, (quoting Frederick Buechner) "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

As adults, we try to teach our children that life should be fair, and ideally, we wish it was. But it's not always. There is nothing fair about people being held in a shoddy and dehumanizing detention center in the Florida Everglades, no matter their crimes or immigration status.

There is nothing fair about the Air Force denying retirement benefits to transgender service members.

There is nothing fair about the rights of a minority, like, say, marriage, being debated and decided by people of extreme privilege.

There is nothing fair about being born in Gaza in the year 2025 and dying of hunger.

Life is not fair.

Power-hungry, wealth-obsessed people, who live in total depravity, have made life unfair for so many people since the dawn of humanity. As the poet of Ecclesiastes writes: "There is nothing new under the sun." And my god, if that seems depressing, I get it. It kind of is.

But here's the thing. The point of Ecclesiastes isn't to make you "abandon all hope, ye who enter here."¹ Rather, it is to help us accept the truths and rhythms of life, so that we might become wise and live deeply from the heart.

¹ Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri : Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise. New York :The Union Library Association, 1935.

In some ways, it reminds me of Buddhist practices that teach how our attachments and desire for permanence and control lead to suffering because we live in a world marked by change and impermanence. Maybe *that* is what is meant by, “Vanity of vanities.”

That word “vanity” in Hebrew is *hevel*. And while the English translation is often vanity or pointless or empty, with one scholar even arguing to translate it as absurd or absurdities,² the root of the word *hevel* actually simply means vapor or mist, something that cannot be caught or nailed down or forced to stay. In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, the author uses the phrase, “like chasing after the wind.”

Now, we all know that the reality is that the wind cannot be caught. Chasing after the wind is pointless; it is a vanity of vanities, isn’t it?

But, I wonder, have you ever seen children chase after the wind? They run with joy and abandon, with a kind of lightness and a swiftness that comes with doing something that is meant to just be fun and silly.

Likewise, our lives are a mystery and cannot always be fully understood. We don’t know why bad things happen to good people or why life is so unfair sometimes, and trying to figure it out is perhaps like chasing after the wind – futile. But that doesn’t mean it cannot also be full of joy or love or fun.

Marci, last week, talked about delight. Similarly, the author of Ecclesiastes encourages us “to eat and drink and take pleasure” in all our toil because yes, the journey of life is hard, but it’s all we’ve got, and there’s so much we *can* do to enjoy life and make it better for others along the way.

That’s why we fight for justice, after all, so that others might find delight and pleasure in day to day living, too.

People of God, life isn’t worth it because it’s fair. Life is worth it because we are created *for* love and created *in* love. And *God* is love.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which I had to learn for my confirmation class, asks, “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer is this: “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” In modern English, we might say, “What’s the purpose of life?”

To live in awe of God and to enjoy God’s presence.”

It may not seem particularly profound, but perhaps freeing ourselves of the need to be heavy, and understanding that life, instead, is like vapor, allows us to truly live life to its fullness.

Since March, Calvary has hosted three Death Cafés which have been very well attended by both members of the congregation and by neighbors who would not otherwise step inside a church. It’s led by facilitators who regularly do this kind of work, but in partnership with our congregation.

And for those of you wondering, “What is a Death Café?” A Death Café is a discussion group where people, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death. It is not a grief support group or a counseling session, but a conversation about death with no particular agenda. The objective is ‘to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives’.

Like Ecclesiastes, it is facing the impermanence and temporal nature of living, so that we might live deeply and from the heart. Once we let go, we can let live.

It doesn’t right all the wrongs, but it may allow us to appreciate and notice the little things that can bring joy and meaning, the things that point us to God and to something beyond just us and the daily grind.

Maybe it will help us slow down, reprioritize and reorganize our lives, stop filling our days with busy-ness, and start filling our days with joy and laughter. For everything, there is a season, after all.

One commentator on Ecclesiastes notes that “In the face of death and ‘vanity’, Ecclesiastes repeatedly urges humans to embrace life and what’s good—food, drink, love, (rest,) and play—as gifts from God.”

God wants us to enjoy life. God wants us to enjoy creation. God wants us to enjoy God. And even though death is inevitable for both the righteous and the unrighteous, God chooses to create life again and again nonetheless. And ours is a God who knows all about resurrection. Because death, though inescapable, does not have the last word.

² Fox, Michael V. “On הָבֵל in Qoheleth: A Reply to Mark Sneed.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138 (2019): 559–63.

So yes, we are nothing but dust, vapor, vanity of vanities. But we are also God's dream; God's creation; and God's beloved.

And I am heartened by the poets of the past and the poets of today who remind us of this. Rupī Kuar, a Sikh poet, says this, reminding us, that though we are just vapor, we are also so strong and resilient.

She writes:

what is stronger
than the human heart
which shatters over and over
and still lives

People of God, our Creator invites us to live. Our hearts will break, but life's beauty will also take your breath away.

So, enjoy the gifts that God has placed in our lives—that purple, sequin jacket if that's your thing, or that furry face that greets you when you get home, or the softness of freshly cleaned sheets, or the not-so-quiet snores of that child who sneaks into bed with you.

The meaning of life isn't found out there in some ivory tower, nor does it require us to embark on some special quest. It's found within us and among us, around us, and in-between us.

The kin-dom of God is near. In fact, it is here. Right here in front of us. Can you not perceive it?