

“The Preacher”

PENTECOST 3

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All of us have learned “life” lessons
that have served us well.

More often than not,
these lessons have not come
in a book or a classroom
but through another person,
an experience, or even a failure.

One such learning for me occurred
on the Chesapeake Bay as I was
at the helm of a 25’ yacht.

Twenty-four hours before, I received
a phone call from Garret Freeland,
who thought I needed a day off
on board his newly acquired craft.

I can still remember Garrett’s
mid-western accented voice telling me
to alter our course by three degrees
or else we would be ship-wrecked
upon the breakers at the foot of
the Bay Bridge.

About a half hour later we sailed under
the bridge’s main span.

That day I learned a little adjustment in
the present could mean a great deal
more in the future.

The Philadelphia-born vaudevillian and
comic actor W.C. Fields led an unrestrained
showbiz life displaying a fondness
for alcohol and mistresses.

He was not known as a religious man
but when he was diagnosed with a
life-threatening illness, he began

to read the Bible.
When a visiting friend found Fields
sitting in the garden with a Bible in hand,
he asked him why he had lately
taken up reading it.
Fields humorously and honestly replied,
“I am looking for loopholes.”

Like W.C. Fields, many people think
the Bible’s main purpose was getting people
right with God, preparing them for heaven,
and saving their eternal souls.
It has something to do with that,
but not everything.
The scriptures are also concerned with living
on this earth faithfully, lovingly and generously.
Didn’t Jesus teach us to pray,
“on earth as it is in heaven?” (Matthew 6:10)
There is a distinctive strain of writing in
the Bible that more or less specializes
in dealing with human experience just as it is.
Wisdom is the biblical term for this
on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven living.

Even though he did not write them all,
King Solomon the Wise’s name has been
associated with the wisdom books
of the Hebrew scriptures.
The book of Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs,
Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Esther
have served me as guides to enable me
better to understand my pastoral roles
and tasks these past 46 years.
It wasn’t in my Lutheran Seminary
Old Testament classes but in a voluntary
Thursday afternoon bible study for pastors
taught by a Presbyterian pastor who
would go on to international fame with
his contemporary translation of the Bible,
titled “The Message.”

Eugene Peterson, who died last November at the age of 85, taught a group of us that the Megilloth, the five scrolls in the Hebrew Bible were read at festivals and fasts.

The Song of Songs (also known as Songs of Solomon) was read at Passover, Ruth at Pentecost, Lamentations on the ninth of Ab, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, and Esther at Purim.

Each of these Megilloth, set by Judaism in an act of worship, highlights an aspect of pastoral work which is still important today: learning how to love and pray as God's beloved (Song of Songs); developing and forming an identity as a person of faith in the context of God's story (Ruth), dealing with suffering, loss, and mourning (Lamentations); reminding people you cannot make a religion without God and achieve wholeness without faith (Ecclesiastes), and becoming a community of faith and blessing in a hostile environment (Esther).

Last week I had expected to be present for the baptisms of Wyatt and Cooper and begin this sermon series on the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Who better than a person named Qoheleth to speak for the preachers?

The Hebrew name or title Qoheleth means literally "preacher" or "teacher or assembler."

Qoheleth's pastoral evaluation of the state of religion in his time is summed up in one Hebrew word "hebel."

It connotes what is visible or recognizable but at the same time unsubstantial, momentary and profitless.

Qoheleth uses the word forty times throughout his Ecclesiastes scroll and both at the beginning

(1:2) and ending (12:8) he doubles it for dramatic usage: “Vanities of vanities all is vanity.”

That is the obstacle Qoheleth seeks to drive out of Israel, to sweep clean with his vision.

Who was Qoheleth and when did he write?

The general period in which he is known to have lived is the late Persian and early Greek period from about 350 to 250 B.C.

It is one of the least known periods in Israel’s biblical history.

Of course, nothing occurs or is written in a vacuum.

Judging from the contents of Ecclesiastes twelve chapters, one can surmise that the religious situation that fits what is known as Qoheleth’s century is time not much unlike ours- a peacetime culture of moderate property and changing sexual mores in which religion does not seem all that too important.

Under such conditions two things developed- a deterioration of healthy, biblical faith and neurotic beliefs in an approaching doomsday.

Ecclesiastes was among the last books of the Old Testament to be written.

Given the way things were going in Judaism at the time, one can appreciate a voice like Qoheleth who refused to cater to the demands for either a warmed-over wisdom or half-baked predictions of gloom, for which there was, and continues to be such a ready audience and market.

It is no wonder that the Jews who wanted to preserve their faith and pass it down to future generations assigned Ecclesiastes to the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The theme of Tabernacles worship was

God's bounty and blessing
It combined the seasonal festivities
of a harvest festival (bounty) with
the historic memories of miraculous
preservation in the wilderness (blessing).

It was time of plenty and rejoicing.
The natural goodness of creation (the grain harvest)
and the supernatural goodness of God
(water, manna, and quail) represented
the preached truth that God gives abundant
life to his people as in the familiar 23rd
Psalm "my cup runneth over."

These themes continue to be repeated in
our Christian worship as we offer gifts
and praise to God his goodness and grace.

Most significantly, Ecclesiastes was assigned
reading for the Feast of Tabernacles

The most negative of scrolls was required
reading at the most positive of feasts.

The joining together of Ecclesiastes and
Tabernacles is plainly pastoral,
for as long as people are in touch with
God in worship and in their hearts
and memories, they put their faith and
trust in God alone.

Qoheleth serves this pastoral function
by challenging the naïve optimism
which assumes that being on God's side
carries with it the comfortable wisdom
that solves all difficulties, and by
cautioning the expectation of miraculous
rescues.

Qoheleth's detached honesty is a pastoral
statement to what God does and will do,
not what we expect of God.

There is no message he has to deliver,
all that is left for him to do
is warn against illusions

I think of the Preacher in terms of
parents who call their children to dinner.
The children come in from play with dirty
hands and are instructed,
“Go wash up. You can’t sit down
at the table until you are clean.”

We are called to do the same on Sunday
mornings.
Every Sunday we sit down or kneel down
for Sunday dinner- the Lord’s Supper.
As a preacher who is a pastor,
I feel responsible for providing a spiritually
nourished and well served meal.
Whether or not I succeed or not does not
matter, for the sacrament of the altar
always feeds the flock fully.
Some Sundays, while the Preacher
may do his wash, we still feel empty.
But it is an emptiness that will be filled
with the Spirit of God and Christ’s meal.

Beloved people of God,
on a perfect day for sailing four decades ago,
a wise man offered sage advice
and I took it.
One thing I have learned over the years is
we worship a God who does things for us
that we cannot do for ourselves.
God is not the sum of total of what
humanity is in the process of learning
about itself, the world around us
and the universe itself.
“God”, as the 20th century savior, preacher
and theologian Karl Barth defines is “Wholly Other.”
The gospel message says, “We don’t live
in a mechanistic world ruled by necessity,
we don’t live in a random world ruled by chance
we live in a world ruled by the
God of Exodus and Easter.

We come to God not to get our way but to get God's,
not to acquire a means of impressing our friends
but telling God to make an eternal
impression on us.

When all is said and done,
we will truly realize that life is a journey
and it does not matter where you begin but how you finish.

AMEN