

Business

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
September 24, 2017

During choir rehearsal last Wednesday evening, Ben commented on the unusual piano introduction to Rutter's "To Everything There is a Season." He said he was not sure what it meant, but that he was sure it meant something! What do you think it means? Listen again ...

(Miah plays on the piano the first twenty-four measures of the piece.)

What do you hear? Is the music calm, serene, harmonic, happy? Or is it discordant, choppy, unsettling, unsettled? Does it seem to be going anywhere?

I think the music is meant to reflect our experience, our daily experience of jumbled and busy lives, going here and going there but toward what end we're not really sure, except farther and farther, always farther and farther, down the path from the past into the future, lives often filled with uncertainty, with discordant pieces, with ups and downs.

Ups and downs. I have good days, days when everything comes easily and I feel confident and satisfied with my work, and I have bad days, days when nothing seems to go right and I struggle to accomplish anything, and I can't predict beforehand which will be which. And the world has good days and bad days, lately it seems too many, way too many, bad days.

We are beset by events, swept along by the tide of time and history. We are swept along by the tide of our history as a human race, racing toward ... who knows? And we are swept along by the tide of our own personal histories, beset along the way by misfortune and accident and illness and aging and, one day, for every one of us and every one we love, by death.

But breaking into the midst of this chaos, this discord, this uncertainty, is this flowing melody ...

*For every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven ...*

Which means what? At least three things:

- We shouldn't be surprised. Things happen.
- That there is, in all these things, a flow, an unfolding, a sense of order, of proper time and place.
- But we can't see it! We don't know it.

God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

We understand past and future, we are oriented to time, but subject to it, too. We know our past and want to hold on to it, at least the best parts of it, but we cannot except in memory, and memories fade. We don't know our future, but we do our best to anticipate it, plan for it, control it, but our ability to steer the flow of what will be is limited at best, and yet we keep trying.

We are strange creatures. We know, but we don't know. We see, but we don't see. We dream, but cannot make dreams come true. We are like gods, but we are not God.

And that is the glory and the dilemma of our human existence: we are like gods, but we are not God. We are not God and so the uncertainties of past and future weigh on us and frustrate us, worry us, make us anxious and, sometimes, afraid. We are not God, but we are like gods, so we keep on trying, keep on trying to outwit time, to outrun fate, to bend the future to our own will. We are strange creatures, glorious creatures, but when we try to be something we are not and can never be, we are pitiful creatures.

Ecclesiastes speaks words of caution and of comfort, reminding us what we are and what we are not, challenging our hubris, exposing our self-delusion, reining in our overreach, and unmasking our obsession with our personal business.

Our business. Our business is our busyness. A busy person is responsible, successful, ambitious, useful, admirable, going somewhere. A person who is not busy is lazy, unmotivated, useless, sorry, going nowhere. In our culture, social standing is determined by how much money you have or how many hours you work or both. "What did you do today?" Isn't it embarrassing, isn't it humiliating, if you have to answer: "Nothing?"

We are all about growth. We are all about productivity. We are all about busyness. How many times have you heard someone say: "I'm not happy unless I am busy?" Because? Because you genuinely enjoy what you are doing? If that is true, bless you, bless you because your busyness is a blessing. Or is it because it is expected, because you feel you must be busy? If that is true, bless you, because you bear a heavy and unhappy burden.

Our culture is all about growth, all about productivity, all about busyness.

Why? To grow the economy.

Why? To raise the standard of living and benefit all of us.

Really?

Is either the motive or the result of raised productivity the benefit of all of us? Between 1973 and 2014, the productivity of American workers increased more than 72% while the typical worker gained less than a 9% increase in compensation. (Economic Policy Institute, <http://tinyurl.com/nhfyj5>). Who benefits from increased productivity? What is the point?

I am neither an economist nor a businessman, but I am a minister of the gospel and an interested observer of the human condition and it is difficult for me to discern any direct benefit to human beings as human beings from ever increasing productivity and ever increasing busyness, any direct benefit to human beings as human beings on either side of the wealth divide. It does not seem that the human economy is serving us but that we are serving it, all of us mere cogs in some huge machine over which none of us has any real input or control and which is growing merely to feed itself.

What gain have the workers from their toil?

Wealth is often arbitrary and is unequally and unfairly distributed. Wealth is capricious and ephemeral and even dangerous, to body and soul, and wealth does not bring the satisfaction we expect it to provide. Money cannot buy happiness.

And security is an illusion. Remember Jesus' story of the rich man, who planned well for his retirement, who set aside more than enough to sustain him in the good life for years to come. "You fool," God said. "This every night you will have to give up your life and then what use are all these things you have kept for yourself?"

No, the only gain workers have from their toil is the toil itself, and the only blessing busy people have from all the things they are doing is the doing itself.

I know that there is nothing better for us than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

It is the doing that is the gain, and that is God's gift. It is the living itself that is the gain, and that is God's gift. Our business is not busyness, our business is happiness, enjoying the life we have day by day by day as long as we have it.

Every Sunday morning before worship, I sit in my office, or stand, and I pray. I pray for the presence of God's Spirit in our worship, animating us and illuminating us and exciting us. I pray for blessing and encouragement and the touch of God for each of you who come into the sanctuary. And I give God thanks. I thank God for the extraordinary privilege of doing ministry.

Yes, I do hope for gain from my toil! I want to be appreciated for my work. I want to feel that my work has some benefit, that hearts and minds will be challenged or comforted or changed. I want to feel that I will have left some kind of spiritual legacy among you after I have gone. But all that is chasing the wind. The privilege is not in the results or the rewards. The privilege is the doing itself, that is God's gift.

These are God's gifts ...

... the privilege of sharing with Ada J Lorraine Brock Medhus the day of her baptism.

... the privilege of graciously welcoming whoever crosses our threshold today.

... the privilege of hearing the word of God and having God's own Spirit breathe that word into our minds and hearts and bodies.

... the privilege of offering God our praise, our uninhibited and unconstrained praise, the privilege of "standing [here] in awe before God" because God is God and we are not!

... the privilege of living this one day, of eating and drinking and taking pleasure in this one day, because it is God's gift.