

Dust

Ecclesiastes 3:16 - 4:6

October 1, 2017

This is as bleak as Ecclesiastes gets. This is one of the darkest chapters in a rather dark book.

Hard work is useless.

Our lives have no more meaning than the lives of animals.

It would be better to have never been born.

Bleak. Dark. Somber. Now what is edifying about that?

Who says the Bible is supposed to be edifying? As if its every sentence must contain some moral lesson, some rule for right living, some answer to our most burning questions, some tool to help us cope with life's difficulties and travails?

The Bible is not an answer book, not a rule book, not a moral encyclopedia to be consulted when facing a particularly perplexing ethical choice, not a compendium of reassuring sayings to be read when feeling discouraged or depressed. The Bible is testimony, the rich and diverse and compelling testimony of the long unfolding and still unfolding story of the relationship between a people and their God.

Or, I should say, of the relationship between God and his people, because the initiative is all on God's side. As much as we might want to say that the Bible reflects our human endeavor to learn something about God and to discern God's will for us, it is more accurate to say that the Bible reflects God's persistent efforts to get through to us. The Bible does not tell the story of our search for God, but of God coming to us, again and again and again, God coming to us in word and in action, inviting us into relationship, calling us into joy, saving us from ourselves.

The Bible reveals God to us, but it also and especially reveals us to us. It shows us as we are, in all our stubbornness and pride, in all our frailty and wrongheadedness. It tells the truth of our story as it is, so we may be healed, so we may be saved, from ourselves.

That's what the Philosopher will say once we reach the end of this book of Ecclesiastes:

The Philosopher tried to find comforting words, but the words he wrote were honest.

The words he wrote were honest ...

Honest words.

[The dead] are better off than those who are still alive, but better off than either are those who have never been born.

Better off because they never had to see injustice! They never had to see people suffering and oppressed and abused and helpless, helpless because all the power belongs to their oppressors. It is heartbreaking. It is appalling. And it is true. It was true then and it is true now.

A half million Rohingya have fled their native Myanmar (Burma) for Bangladesh, being systematically purged from their homeland by the empowered Buddhist majority and their military. And the rest of us let it happen. An aid worker in Burma, Caroline Vandenabeele, says that “it soon became clear to everyone that raising the Rohingyas' problems, or warning of ethnic cleansing in senior UN meetings, was simply not acceptable.”

You could do it but it had consequences ... negative consequences, like you were no longer invited to meetings and your travel authorisations were not cleared. Staff were taken off jobs - and humiliated in meetings. An atmosphere was created that talking about these issues was simply not OK. (Reported by Jonah Fisher, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41420973>.)

No one would help them, because their oppressors had power on their side.

But ethnic cleansing is part of our own history, too. In a recent book entitled, *American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*, Benjamin Madley carefully documents “the organized destruction of California’s Indian peoples under US rule.” In that short twenty-seven years, the Native American population in the California territory was reduced by a systematic campaign of violence from 150,000 men, women, and children to 30,000.

No one would help them, because their oppressors had power on their side.

This is not “ancient” history. All this was happening at the time our church was being founded.

And just this Thursday, it was reported that five African-American cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy Preparatory School in Colorado found the words, “Go home, n*****,” written on the whiteboards outside their rooms. The work of just a few “bad apples?” Maybe so. And yet, this attack is merely one more expression of the centuries-old oppression of one race by another in this country, a shameful aspect of our history that we still struggle to leave behind, at least in part because “white America” -- which is a most unfortunate label to have to use, as if there is more than one America -- because white Americans have never fully owned their common guilt.

For decades, for generations, “No one would help them, because their oppressors had power on their side,” and, sometimes, it is still true.

No, it is not edifying to be shown the world as it really is. It is not uplifting to be shown ourselves as we really are. But what is the cost of not seeing? What is the cost of forgetting? What are the costs of willful blindness and willful amnesia? The oppressed are crying, and Ecclesiastes is crying with them.

Honest words. Hard work is useless.

The busy people say: "We would be fools to fold our hands and let ourselves starve to death." Maybe so.

Maybe so, says the Philosopher, but better to have only a little, with peace of mind, than be busy all the time with both hands, trying to catch the wind.

It's not the work itself that is useless, but the motive that drives the work. It is envy, the Philosopher says, that drives people. We work so hard so we can have what "they" have.

Why? Why do we want what "they" have? To enjoy it? Or to have it? And if we work so hard just so we can have it, what kind of life is that? Useless!

Envy is the opposite of gratitude. Envy is ungrateful, unhappy, unsatisfied with what God has provided, unsatisfied with the life God has given. Better to be happy. Better to be happy and grateful to God for what we have.

Honest words. We are dust.

We are! God took soil, God took dust, and breathed life into it, and there we were. We are dirt! We are animated dirt!

Aren't we? We are no better than animals. We are made of the same stuff. Like animals, we are creatures. Like animals, we return to the dust from which we came.

We are not immortal beings trapped in fading bodies. We are what we seem to be -- this! This is the life we have: to eat and drink and laugh and cry and taste and see for as many days as we have. Does that make your life any less precious? Or does that make your life all the more precious? We don't know. We don't know what will happen after we die. Only God knows.

What do we know? What do we have? We have this life, the life God has given us. And we have God. And that is enough. That is everything.

This is Ecclesiastes' refrain: The best thing we can do is enjoy what we have. If you do enjoy what you have and enjoy who you are, if you are grateful to God for what you have and for who you are, what else could you need? What else could you want? And who is your competition? And what can threaten you? What can take away from you anything that matters? If you have God?

Ecclesiastes speaks honest words: we are dust. We are dust ...

*All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners*

*or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial --*

*Did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?*

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