

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
January 1, 2012

Sermon Notes: From Resignation to Acceptance
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Readings:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Matthew 24:31-46

We like things clear. Spelled out.

What is the weather going to be today?

What time is the next train?

How much does it cost?

What do I owe?

How much will I be paid?

Is this the one?!

Simply. We like to know. We sometimes ask questions until we make people crazy; trying to nail down things. If anyone has turned on a television or read any news reports over the last two weeks, all the buzz is about the Iowa Caucus and who is up in the polls and who is down. One begins to think, especially on the cable shows, if there is nothing else besides this and reports of consumer spending over the Christmas holidays - was it up, was it down?

What happened to Christmas?

All of this, of course looking to answer the real question most people want to know: what's next? What does the future hold?

In many ways we seek the future.

The writers of Ecclesiastes (some think it is Solomon, some think not) seems to have had enough with the questions and those seeking "to know" the future.

For the writer, it's simple: there is a time for this and a time for that. Considering the historical period in which it was written, even the phrases that make me wince a bit, acknowledging that there is a time "to kill and a time to heal" – as much as I hope we are moving away from an acceptance of killing as a way of living; for the time in which this was written – wars, invasions, conquests were all part of the landscape.

Hmmm....still sort of part of the landscape.

Still, what made this Book of Ecclesiastes part of the Old Testament? Why was it included?

I have read some on this; scholars are divided. Sort of themselves: this or that. It was Solomon; it wasn't. Solomon wrote it; later editors changed it. And so forth...still even if it might have come from Solomon, and it sounds like it may have, it should be part of the Canon, just in case. After all, Solomon is Solomon – or he's not.

So, I feel like the lack of definition is an invitation to enter into the text ourselves and see if there is some linkage with today and especially this being part of the readings on this first Sunday of Christmas.

For me, at first, these words are almost an admonition as if spoken to a petulant child, sort of the answer I would get when I sometimes asked the question, "Why?"

"Because."

Solomon or whoever the author was almost sounds like that, doesn't he or she?

"Why are things this way, Solomon?"

"Why the great joy in the birth of a child and then the sorrow when they die? Why can't we just live forever – or why even bother at all..."

"Why are we fighting one minute and then caring for each other the next? Why fight at all – or why bother to heal?"

And so forth...

From the writer's perspective, across a less complicated landscape of information and news than we have today; across a timeline that certainly moved more slowly than the one in which we "keep time" today, it must have seemed very clear:

There is a time to be born and a time to die.
There is a time to kill and a time to heal.

In some ways, it seems to me that the author has a touch of superiority, a touch of condescension. Sort of saying to those complaining. "Sit down, sit down – you're rocking the boat." God has given you people work to keep busy; you're incapable of knowing what God has done or will do. So be happy, let them enjoy themselves as best they can "and take pleasure in their toil."

Sounds almost like saying the narrator is saying, “They’re just not too bright. Let them work and toil and be satisfied – and we, the royalty and upper class will supported by their toil; more – should be supported by their toil. It is our divine right as monarchs.

Sounds like the common folk of the time were original 99% - ers?

Fast forward to 1927, Fritz Lang the German expressionist directs the classic silent sci fi movie *Metropolis*. It depicts a world 100 years hence, in which the upper class above ground was supported by a whole population of the workers and slaves below the ground; toiling for the benefit of the entitled – until the revolt came. It is a terrific movie and available online or on CD.

99%-ers? Indeed. “The revolting crowd...”

And the revolt does come. It always does. It has to.

Sounds a little “Ecclesiastical” – doesn’t it? A time for revolts a time for none.

But even revolutions can change. Imagine one that lifts us beyond “under the sun” to the place that the author of Ecclesiastes closes the book with:

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep God’s commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (12:13).

Like so much of the First or Old Testament, it is a didactic (from the ruler’s perspective) written in a sense of instruction, commands, ways to life – sometimes calling people to a sense of resignation. It’s the same feeling of *fatalism* I sense when someone says “it is what it is.” Honestly, for all the people for whom that makes sense – I still don’t get it.

Back to Ecclesiastes, As I said, written just a couple of hundred years before the Birth of Jesus, it is as if the if there were to be any justice in the world, anything in this world beside “a time to live and a time to die” – God would need to make a move. And it was a move that has changed everything, set a new order that reversed “the first shall be first to the last shall be first”; “the least among you shall be first”; “love God with all your heart, soul, and mind – and love one another as you love yourself.”

Put down your swords.

This revolution is far from “a time to love and a time to hate”...this is a redistribution of the power of the Universe delivered to us, by God, in the form of a child, that we were (and continue to be) trusted to care for.

In other words, we are trusted to care for Love in this world, and in so do we accept Jesus. In so doing, we accept God in the many ways the God of Love is known.

And with that trust comes a whole new way of being.

Question: Do you think that if someone has trust in you they have faith in you to trust them?

How about if God has trust in you?

Do you think God has faith in you to trust God?

That for me is the central shift from resignation to acceptance. But it's not easy. We just heard the words of this morning's Gospel from Matthew.

Jesus was right there with the disciples and they still didn't get it. So, Jesus elevated his rhetoric and narrative, making his point about how when you take care of the least among you you are taking care of him. You are loving him. You are trusting in him. You are accepting him and God and Spirit. And when you don't. When you ignore others you may as well just go back to the old ways –to the hands of those who will oppress and marginalize you in the comfort and surety they promise. You will be like animals led to slaughter, not knowing any better. Heaven? Fuggedaboutit!

I have a feeling that Jesus had a way of making his point and getting through. And we know he could stir things up with some pretty strong language, even hyperbole, such as when he said to Peter, "Get thee behind me Satan" when Peter was out of line.

There is so much here, so much to talk about, but for today the point – one of them is that we all come to this table today, and we will share in the gifts upon it. We will take from the table, as we should – for it is a source of God's gifts to us in as many ways as are uncountable.

But what do **we bring**? What do **we bring** to the table?

There have been several times in my life where I needed to make a choice about going on in one way or the other. I knew the way I believed I should take, but I also knew what I had: the security and comfort and predictability of my situation. I had learned that God trusted me, loved me – but the question that now begged an action was whether or not I trusted and loved God. Did I have the faith to place everything in God's hands, trusting in God, loving in God, and leaving the outcome to God?

Honestly, it is always a struggle for me.

But, each time I have done this, it has been an exhilarating experience in that I took real actions based on my acceptance of and faith in God. Did each situation turn out as I expected? Hardly. Was each outcome what I needed to grow in God's presence? Yes. Unequivocally, yes!

And each of these spiritual experiences where I really let go were like finding stones beneath my feet to help me cross a river or boundary of some kind. Today journey continues, as I try to walk faithfully enough so the stones turn into a path, albeit a path that will always bring risks, primarily the risk of trusting, believing, loving, and accepting God enough to take action, knowing I in turn am loved and cared for. And there is only one reason to work at this, so that by helping others, by sharing the message we have been given to share, the Good News, that we can see just how much every step we take is already in the presence of God.

With that in mind, today, as we come to this table, loved and trusted by God; seeking a love and trust in God that moves us to caring for others – bring whatever you can to this table, but if you can (and you can) bring forgiveness for those who you think of as I say these things.

Bring forgiveness, if only as a prayer that those you consider forgiving be given the love and presence of God that you find in your life, the love – the Baby Jesus – that we have been given to care for – in each person we meet.

Not only will you find release, but you will find acceptance of another of the amazing gifts you have been given by God: the gift of forgiveness of one another.

May it be so, now, in these days of our Lord, Jesus Christ, these days of the new revolution.