

Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 Eternity In Our Hearts

American folk song writer Pete Seeger is the one who set this text to music, though it was a 60's Rock and Roll band called "The Byrds" that made it famous. The song has a melancholy feel to it that derives from the acknowledgments in the text that there is a time for death, a time to kill; a time for destruction, for weeping and mourning, a time for tearing things up and throwing them away, even a time to hate and a time for war.

Though the text itself is counterbalanced by the opposites; a time for life, and time to heal, a time to build, for laughing and dancing, a time to keep and mend and speak; there is a time for love and peace; its melancholy realism is very sobering.

"To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven," and then Seeger adds, "turn, turn, turn."

This remarkable realism forces us to tell the truth about the human condition and the context of our earthly lives. The text comes from the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, from a book called, "Ecclesiastes," associated with King Solomon, David's son. The book begins;

"'Meaningless, meaningless,' says the Teacher, 'utterly meaningless! everything is meaningless!'" Or in the more familiar language of the KJV, "Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity." The conviction of the bible, of course, is just the opposite, that everything is meaningful.

The New Year

The sentiment of the New Year is also the opposite from what is found in Ecclesiastes. It is one of great hopefulness and anticipation that this time around will be filled with wonder at the meeting of new people and the encountering of new opportunities. This year is new because it is the year we will finally throw off the old habits and the attitudes of the heart that confine us and keep us stuck in the groove that burdens our lives and makes us feel like we are just going around in endless circles.

It is no accident that whoever put the lectionary together gave this reading for today, January 1st, New Years Day, the day we observe and celebrate the turning of the earth around sun. This text restrains our hope and is the bible's way of encouraging us to acknowledge our place in and dependence upon this earth's life and cycles; the necessities and vulnerabilities common to human experience. So these acknowledgments are made at the beginning of the

year, in a time when many people make resolutions and unrealistic expectations run high.

Everything All At Once

It is possible to focus on the oppositions in the text and pick one for special attention, but I am not so inclined. Instead I am struck by the busyness of life these days, in which all the times are ripe. Perhaps it would not be far from the meaning of the text if we summarized, “there is a time when everything has its time all at once.” Modern life with all its activities and choices is calling out to us that it is now time for everything.

This feature of life has always been true to a certain extent. One person’s time to be born is another’s time to die; one person’s time for war is another’s time for peace. All I mean is that the fast pace of modern life and its “post-modern” information age access to the larger world around us creates a sense of chaos, restlessness, or at least overload; and it is a feature of the times. Thus, life is confusing because we are tearing down and building up at the same time, planting and harvesting, keeping and throwing away.

There is time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven, and that time is now, for all of it. There is no time to rest up from life a little, no time to see the timeless quality of all life. We are even capable of

having summer and winter at the same time because we can get on a plane or in a car and go to where there is warmth or snow anytime we want, or I am sure someone is thinking, just live in Ohio.

Our text teaches that whatever the circumstances of life in time may be, we are forced to face them and order our lives by them. We live on earth and are bound by its cycles. There is no better time than the New Year to be reminded that there is nothing we can do about it.

And Yet

Facing the mundane quality of life is healthy, it keeps us grounded in reality, but it is not gospel. Reading Ecclesiastes one might not expect to find much gospel. The book, beginning so negatively as it does, more than other books must be accompanied by the whole of scripture to be seen as a gospel message. But there is a line that stands out for its gospel sentiment.

“He has also set eternity in the hearts of men . . .”

What does this mean, that God has set eternity in our hearts?

Eternity In Our Hearts

It means we do not live out these seasons as if they are tragic but can see beyond them to a greater reality in which;

the whole is more than the sum of the parts
there is a dream of a new heaven and a new earth that is not kept in bondage by the seasons of life
where the cycles are broken and the power of the tragic side of human life is overcome and
there is the forgiveness of sins
and the resurrection of the dead

It means not only that we are given to see and understand a little more about our everyday lives but also to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond. And what we see suggests to us what is truly meaningful and important.

The Gospel Miracle

Though we are not able to leave time behind, the one who stands beyond time has broken through and taught us that though by themselves our things and our traditions are meaningless just like the Teacher wrote, they do not come by themselves, but in relationship to God which fills all our relationships with meaning.

He taught that the rule of love is the highest rule. He taught us to forgive because we have been forgiven. He taught us to be good and love goodness. He taught that nothing in the cycle of death and decay can steal the life we have been given away from us. The gospel miracle is that we are aware of these timeless truths and this awareness is part of what it means to have eternity in our hearts.

With eternity in our hearts we can listen to the words of the Teacher of Ecclesiastes and learn to enjoy the beautiful experiences of life without making idols out of them and suffer the tragedies without being discouraged and devastated by them; and to do good whenever possible.

It is a message the world has not quite learned, but it is still proclaimed and once heard is never quite forgotten. The old Pete Seeger song adds a line to the text, a challenge to his times, "I swear its not too late."

The Teacher may not have had that hope, but he saw something, he called it eternity, and the larger message of the bible confirms it. As long as the earth continues to turn around the sun and we observe New year's days it is not too late to learn and accept the Grace of God and by faith to be transformed by its love and hope.

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