

***The Search for Meaning:
Between Egypt and the Promised Land***

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Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon. —Susan Ertz

Ancient Witness: Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

Today is the last of a series of sermons based on the writings of that great Jewish Teacher and Speaker to the gathering of people, Ecclesiastes. As I said before, this remarkable book of wisdom literature is about the Teacher's own spiritual journey and his quest for meaning.

In his search for the Big Answer, Ecclesiastes ran into dead end after dead end, disappointment after disappointment. Living the life of comfort and wealth, seeking human wisdom and understanding, and even religion left him dissatisfied and unfulfilled. All of the answers, by themselves, were inadequate. They fall short and will let you down, he said. It's all futile and useless. It's all just chasing after the wind. The Teacher says that it does no good to deny this. In fact, we read earlier that it turns out that this experience of futility is actually the beginning of true faith.

Certain things in life inevitably happen no matter if you are good or bad. You are born; you die. You laugh; you cry. You weep; you dance. And when you've gone through what Ecclesiastes has gone through, you learn to accept these things as part of life.

Yet the question remains. What good is all of this work and toil under the sun? What does life matter? Why did God even bother us with this earthly existence? Why don't we just skip to the eternal life and bypass this temporal life?

Today, we have Ecclesiastes' answer. In our reading he says,

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife (or husband) whom you love... Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. (9:7-10)

Now, Ecclesiastes is not saying, "Go out and have a good time since nothing lasts and nothing matters anyhow." No, rather the Teacher is saying something like, "Look, we are all going to end up in Sheol, the land of the dead. Our lives don't last forever. We need to accept this. But that doesn't mean that life is worthless. We must learn to find meaning and purpose in the transitory; we must learn to savor the moment, even if it doesn't last forever."

The temptation is strong to discard this present life and to hope for a different one. Albert Camus wrote:

If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life.

We don't have to wait for the next life to experience truth, beauty and meaning. Harold Kushner has a sentence that puts it so well,

Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting.

Sometime when you're alone, I want you to close your eyes and remember something that happened for only a moment, in the past, perhaps years ago. It might be an experience of the beauty of nature or a warm embrace or a tender moment when you felt accepted and loved. Now, in a sense, this moment didn't last very long at all, but in another sense, it has lasted all these years and is still present.

And so, maybe we ask the wrong questions about the answer of life. Maybe we are looking for quantity and the question should be more about quality. The assumption that "bigger is better" is blocking our view.

Ecclesiastes is saying, "There is no Answer, but there are answers: love and the joy of working, the simple pleasures of food and fresh clothes, the little things that tend to get lost and trampled in the search for the Grand Solution to the Problem of Life..." (Kushner p. 142) The great Teacher is saying that every day pleasures and experiences are encounters with the divine. And it is this continual stream of encounters that holds answers to life. As Goethe said,

Every situation—no, every moment—is of infinite worth; for it is the representative of a whole eternity.

Jesus said the same sort of thing when someone asked him when the Kingdom of God was coming. He said, "The Kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21) If we are waiting for Something Big, the Ultimate Answer to all of our problems, then we are going to miss our continual stream of encounters with the divine. Mohandas Gandhi said:

My experience tells me that the Kingdom of God is within us, and that we can realize it not by saying "Lord, Lord," but by doing God's will and God's work. If, therefore, we wait for the Kingdom to come as something coming from the outside, we shall be sadly mistaken.

And so, the Kingdom of God is not something that we just enter once and for all when we die, but we enter the Kingdom of God continually, at each moment. And *this* is how we are to live our lives, said Ecclesiastes. Corita Kent once wrote, "Life is a series of moments—to live *each one* is to succeed." The Teacher is saying that it's not about a destination; it's about the journey!

This is how we are to live our lives, says Ecclesiastes. It is not like a puzzle where we work at fitting all the pieces together and that we can finally solve once and that's it. It is more like a never-ending process where we are continually challenged to live moment by moment. Because, you see, God has given us the ability to find greatness in each everyday occurrence, each passing instant. And true wisdom, according to the Teacher, is knowing how to recognize the miracle of God's presence, and not rushing headlong past it in search for "something important." As John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens when you are making other plans." If we keep our eyes focused upon our future rewards in some other life to come or in some huge miracle, we will overlook the kingdom within, and we will miss the kind of life that God has intended for us. For the good life is based not on just a few great moments, but on many, many little ones. "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart," writes the Teacher.

The answer to life is in its living. Life is like a work of art. A person works so hard at living and at making something of one's life, knowing that one day that life will be taken away the way a painter is separated from her painting. We invest our creative energy in a life that we hope will have a lasting value. Like a fine painting that will embody beauty and truth, each moment of our lives can embody God's eternal will which lures us to goodness, unselfishness and joy. Such a life does not fade away, but is joined with other lives which also reflect goodness and unselfishness of God's eternal will. Each moment of goodness and love becomes part of that never ending stream of life that we call the communion of saints.

Living life as a series of moments—as a series of encounters with the divine—enables us to be pulled along by the eternal will of God. By finding the greatness in each everyday occurrence, each instant, we can create something which will endure after we are gone.

Harold Kushner wrote:

I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sand castle by the water's edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.

In the book, *How to Want What You Have*, Timothy Miller wrote:

This is the precious present, regardless of what yesterday was like, regardless of what tomorrow may bring. When your inner eyes open, you can find immense beauty hidden within the inconsequential details of daily life. When your inner ears open, you can hear the subtle, lovely music of the universe everywhere you go. When the heart of your heart

opens, you can take deep pleasure in the company of the people around you—family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers—including those whose characters are less than perfect, just as your character is less than perfect. When you are open to the beauty, mystery, and grandeur of ordinary existence, you “get it” that it always has been beautiful, mysterious and grand and always will be.

The Jewish festival of *Sukkot* (the Feast of Tabernacles), which lasts seven days each Fall, is kind of the prototype of our American Thanksgiving, a kind of harvest festival. Yet it is also a commemoration of God’s presence and care over Israel during the 40 years in the wilderness between being liberated from slavery in Egypt and the Promised Land.

Many Jewish people still build small structures of boards and branches, eat fruit and drink wine and entertain friends during this week. For it is said that the *Sukkot* is a *celebration of the beauty of things that don’t last*. And this is essentially the message of Ecclesiastes—everything in life is futile; it all passes away; nothing lasts. Like the 40 years that Israel was in the wilderness, on earth we live in that in-between time. Yet we can still celebrate love, beauty and truth in life. *Moments of our lives many not be everlasting, but they can be eternal.*

Because, you see, in this earthly life we can sense and feel the care and grace of God. We experience being delivered from bondage, fear and anxiety. We have tasted freedom and glimpsed paradise. Yet we have also not quite made it to the Promised Land. We still struggle, and we still hurt. Our present life is like that journey in the wilderness where each moment is an adventure and a discovery, sometimes with peril and tragedy. And each moment offers an eternal gift from God.