

June 2, 2019

Rev. Kirstie Engel

Ecclesiastes 3:1-10

“Courage to Be”

So here we are Saint Paul... it has been a great four years with you. And I would like to say first off that you have been an integral part of my life both professionally and personally.

In fact, if it were not for my being appointed here in Lincoln Nebraska, I would not have met my amazing husband Stephen.

Our daughters Shaya (15) and Keera (14) I truly do not believe would have had the opportunities they have had; one of many, being a part of the best educational system hands down.... at Irving Middle School and Lincoln High.

I would not have had the pleasure of becoming Ashton (7) and Ella's (10) stepmom I would not have known what it was like to be a part of the contagious atmosphere that embodies Husker football and volleyball and more, witness the fantastic music of Nebraska Wesleyan University, experience some of the most amazing musicals at the Lied Center, eaten some of the best ice cream I have ever eaten at Ivanna Cone or touched Kenny Chesney's hand three times at the Pinnacle Bank Arena country music concert a few weeks back and the list goes on and on and on.

Most importantly I would not have had the opportunity to serve such a loving, amazing church community such as yourself; Saint Paul UMC....you have given me and my family world class, red carpet treatment from the very beginning up until now... and you have prepared me to become a more confident, effective pastor and for this, I give you thanks.

And so with that said, I have preached several sermons before you of different varieties and so there were a number of directions I could have gone with this final message.

And so it would be this morning that the spirit of the Lord has lead me to the book of Ecclesiastes to serve as the biblical foundation for my parting words for you today...and I have entitled this sermon; the courage to be.

Now to give you just a little background on Ecclesiastes. I think it is important to mention that the book of Ecclesiastes is accused by some biblical scholars of being a book that only partially grasps the truth, because it has been considered by some to function against the light of the gospel.

In other words, there does not appear to have the same element of hope and grace of the gospel message that we are accustomed to hearing. However most biblical scholars would agree that we need to hear the author of Ecclesiastes out....because there is truth to what the author has to say....and this is also admitted by most.

And so moving along; as far as who the author of this book is, we do not know specifically by name, but the title (Qohelet) which in English means the Preacher/ teacher has been deemed as an appropriate substitution, because it has been agreed that the writer is most likely a teacher of the Hebrew faith and not King Solomon as previously thought.

But the most important thing to highlight about this book, is that the intention of the book of Ecclesiastes is to present an ideology that captures the every day human condition; where God plays no explicit role in setting the seasons and times.

Furthermore, the Qohelet (preacher) does not say why things occur at their appropriate times. They just do. There is no order of importance in our chapter read today.....nor any other evaluation at all; other than the principle stated in the heading.

Finally none of these times and seasons mentioned in our passage of scripture, reflect any particular message of hope or even promises a fruitful outcome. And so why then preach from such a sobering passage such as this as my final sermon for you today?

Because the passage is real. It's honest. It's timely. It's relatable. It's real because in life, there is often no rhyme or reason why anything happens. It's honest because it does not pretend to know the outcome of anything we might encounter. It's timely because just as the passage alludes to transitions, we as a local church and larger denomination are experiencing transitions on every level and many of us feel uncertain about them. It's relatable because in the verses read for us, many of us have experienced birth and we have experienced death.

Many of us have experienced progress and growth in our lives and many of us have experienced having to rebuild and start all over again. Many of us have experienced everything mentioned in our passage of scripture today or will experience it.

But again the Qohelet does not offer any encouraging words for us in verses 1-9 in our text, but instead she/he just names these occurrences or experiences; almost like if you and I were rattling off items written on a grocery or to do list.

Revealing to us that the metaphorical seasons that we experience as people, are just as unpredictable and just as chaotic and just as random as the seasons of summer, winter, fall and spring. But also letting us implicitly know that whatever the season is we are in.....it will pass.....in its proper time.

So again this is why I appreciate the practicality of this passage of scripture today. Because it names the complexities of what we tend to experience. It names the human condition with no explanation or insight as to why things are the way they are. Furthermore it implicitly names and highlights the old adage that whatever the season is...this too shall pass.

And so for some folks listening to this right now....this piece serves already as the good news....that the season will pass. The transitions will pass. The conflict will pass. The uncertainty will pass. The discomfort will pass.

But you know as a preacher, I have more insight to give.....that although the season will pass, this is not the most encouraging part for me. Because where I am most encouraged is by verses 10-15 of this passage.

Because as debated as this author was for his honesty in the book of Ecclesiastes; when most wanted to dismiss the book altogether because it did not echo the good news of a Savior coming to rescue us all from all of our turmoil.

The author could not deny the abiding presence of God in vs 10-11 where it says *10 I have observed the task that God has given human beings. 11 God has made everything fitting in its time, but has also placed eternity in their hearts, without enabling them to discover what God has done from beginning to end.*

And so why this statement encourages me if I can paint the picture a little clearer for you is because here we have approached this Qohelet (preacher/teacher) who has been essentially dismissed by some of the biblical community because of his/her sobering musings not being grace filled or hope filled enough, acknowledge that even in spite of all that he/she has written to be true for them; the presence of God could still not be denied

And no the Qohelet did not report God's voice coming in the form of a quiet still voice like Elijah in the cave. Nor has the Qohelet mentioned any angels appearing or particular miracles transpiring.

But for some reason, this preacher's rather simple testament affects me even more so in a good way, in a transformative way.

Because his/her declaration of God is not abstract or obtuse. I did not have to pull out 15 commentaries to decipher what the writer was trying to say. Because if I am honest, I personally have never seen anyone walk on water before, but I have experienced turmoil turn into powerful testimonies of everything working itself out.

I have never seen God bring back anyone that I have loved back to life per se, but I have reflected upon times where I could feel my deceased dad's presence so thick as if he were standing right in front of me.

So when the Qohelet of our passage today sums up her/his musings in verse 15 with saying *Whatever happens has already happened, and whatever will happen has already happened before. And God looks after what is driven away.*[b]

I can relate to this testament....because the teacher/preacher is not speaking metaphorically in my biblical assessment. The preacher is not even speaking allegorically. The preacher is speaking as plain and clear and transparent as can be, letting us know that through all of the transitions that we will experience; through all of the turmoil we may endure; in all of the uncertainty and the anxiety of it that it will bring; whatever happens has already happened and whatever will happen has already happened before and God will look after it all.

So the takeaway is that yes the season will pass, but even per the rational, perceived cynic in all of her/his wisdom and honesty; there is a God looking after it and us.

God is looking after us through our transitions. God is looking after us through our uncertainty. God is looking after it all.....that is the good news.

So what then is the response from us the people. I am so glad that you asked...I tell you over these past 4 years, our conversations when I have been up here have been getting good...don't you think?!

I believe that our response comes from this book I just read entitled "The Courage to be." In this book, Paul Tillich; existential philosopher and theologian presents anxiety as the primary modern psychological epidemic.

Tillich further distinguishes three types of anxiety that affects the human race: that of fate and death (ontological); that of emptiness and loss of meaning (spiritual); and that of guilt and condemnation. And so the antidote for this epidemic of anxiety for Tillich is courage. Specifically for us to learn how to acquire the Courage to Be.

Now Tillich describes the "courage to be," as I attempt to put it into my own words, as being "the ethical act in which humanity affirms his/her own being in spite of those elements that challenge or conflict their self-affirmation that hopefully is grounded in faith, wisdom and joy...(and I would personally add love to this list.)"

Or to state it even plainer, having the courage to be the child of God you and I were created to be even if/when the world tells you otherwise. So applying this concept to the larger narrative of this sermon, the transitions that you and I may find ourselves in, or the seasons we may find ourselves in will inevitably invoke anxiety.

Some of the transitions from a church perspective might invoke the anxiety of a symbolic death of what we once had. Some of the transitions from a church perspective might invoke the anxiety of emptiness and loss of important connections and relationships that we have been made. Some of the transitions from a church perspective might invoke even anxiety steeped in guilt of letting go and learning to embrace new leadership and traditions and friends.

In all of the anxious times, whatever is perpetuating these anxieties both individually and collectively.... we must remember the courage to be

And the courage to be first off involves affirming who we are.

And who we are, we are all of course children of God. But most importantly Saint Paul...who you are as a Church is love. Who you are is welcoming.

Who you are...you are risk takers for the kingdom...

Who you are...you are leaders of fresh expressions to reach as many people in love as you can. Who you are.... involves being socially conscious people who care about all matters of injustice on every level. Who you are...involves implementing ministries that only affirms people in the sacred worth they were created in.

So what this means is whatever the transition you may find yourselves in.....do not let the anxiety of the transition, even if it is different; even if it is unclear or unfamiliar.....overtake who you are.

Be courageous in who you are. Be bold in who you are. And trust that in your transitions, that we serve a God who is looking after this community, and supplying you with what you need at the right place, and at the right time....so that you can be courageous in who you are always.

God my friends, I believe allows this intentional shifting of seasons. Where new leadership is brought in to help lead the next phase of where Saint Paul is called to be.

You see each leader that has ever been appointed to this great church, I believe were specifically planted here in a specific time because of their special gifts and skills.

And the good news is that the spirit of God is constantly providing direction on what is needed and who is needed for such a time as this.

And so I trust that you Saint Paul are in good hands. But more importantly I want to thank you for equipping me for my next season.

I thank you, the members and friends of *Saint Paul* United Methodist Church, for the love and support you have shown me while I have ministered among you. I am grateful for the ways my leadership has been accepted. I ask forgiveness for the mistakes I have made.

As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here. And I trust that our time together and our parting are both necessary and pleasing to God.

But now my friends, we are in a new season where I release you from turning to me and depending on me as your pastor.

And I wholeheartedly encourage your continuing ministry here at Saint Paul and will pray for you and for Jane, Lynn and Jed as they lead you through your next season.

I am so thankful that you have patiently loved me through every milestone I have reached and know that you have been a key component to helping me to have the courage to be as well.