

July 31, 2016

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 9-14; 2:18-23

Turn, Turn, Turn

I'm going to start the sermon with a little singing—and I'm hoping you'll do some singing, too, I'm hoping that you'll respond when prompted with the next line of a folk song from some years ago, but still pretty popular. I think you'll know it, I'm hoping you know it... If you recognize this song, sing back at me the response: "To every thing...[turn, turn, turn]..." There is a season [turn, turn, turn...]

We could go on... "A time to be..." But that's all we're going to do, you won't have to sing again during the sermon. Many of you know that song, which was written by Pete Seeger, which became an international hit when it was covered by The Byrds. You may also know that the lyrics are from the Bible. In fact, because of that, because the lyrics come from the Bible, that song holds the distinction, in the U.S., of being the #1 hit with the oldest lyrics. They're old lyrics, and they come from a book that's in the Old Testament, no less, from a book called Ecclesiastes.

When we read from the Bible as part of worship, we follow a pre-set series of readings, and it turns out that in the course of a year, we don't hear from the book of Ecclesiastes all that often. In fact, in the space of twelve months, we'll have readings from the book of Ecclesiastes only two times—only two times! On one of those two times, it's the verses: "A time for this, and a time for that..." But if you want to hear that reading, if you want to hear well known reading from Ecclesiastes that became a wildly popular folk song, you have to come to church on New Year's Day. (A time for, and a time for, it does make sense that we read it on New Year's Day, doesn't it?)

But you came today. And so you get to hear this other reading from Ecclesiastes: one that we don't sing: "Vanity of vanities... There is nothing new under the sun... What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity."

Well, that's a different tune. You may want to raise an eyebrow, when you are prompted to say in response to it: "Thanks be to God." "Their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest..." Thanks be to God.

I actually love it when we have Bible readings like this in church: readings that make us raise our eyebrows, readings that make us wonder, "How do I say thanks, to that?" I love that we read unsettling things in church, do unsettling things in church: things like singing back at the pastor—but other things, too. We do things in church that are unsettling: shaking hands with strangers and saying "The peace of Christ be with you"; eating flesh, drinking blood... We do some things in church that are unsettling. Worship should do that. Every Sunday, in some way, worship should unsettle us, jar our hearts, pierce into our souls, make us wonder what we are doing, here, what we are doing at all, what it means, if it means anything, this life that we know...

Wonder, like the writer of Ecclesiastes does, someone identified as the Teacher. Ecclesiastes, which is one book of the sixty-six books that are the Bible. We call the Bible a book, but it's maybe less like a book than a library, a library of human experience, a library of God's activity with us, a library with sections, one of which is known as wisdom literature,

which is where Ecclesiastes is classified. Wisdom, this wisdom: “All their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest.”

We know those lyrics, we didn't need to be taught this song. Days full of pain—we've had them: the shootings, all these shootings here in Chicago and throughout the country, in other countries; Days full of pain: the diagnosis that's not getting better, the relationship that's not getting better. And then there's work: “work as a vexation: We know that, too: the meetings that go nowhere, the higher expectations with diminishing resources, “do more with less;” the about-to-be implemented upgrade and overhaul that keeps getting delayed and that makes everything more complicated—work is a vexation. And then, even at night, our minds do not rest: lying in bed everything plays back as if on a screen at the back of your head, scenes on fast forward that loop back on repeat, your own personal movie theater. This also is vanity.

This also is wisdom. There is nothing new under the sun—an old, old sentiment, an old, old song. Everyone knows it—that song about everything going to pot, that song about the transitory nature of all we know and all the disappointment still in store. We may think we came up with this song, every generation does. Remember adolescence? Remember when you suddenly realized the hypocrisy of your parents, the superficiality of your peers, the sad state of the world at large, and the pointlessness of doing that homework assignment? Why should you write a book report? You were just going to be saying what everyone else had already said. Or maybe you did your homework, you read “The Catcher in the Rye”—but didn't relate to it. You've made it to adulthood reasonably well-adjusted, reasonably satisfied—but you wonder if that's reasonable, if that's all there is, or if it's all vanity. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes wondered, and so tried various ways of finding meaning: through self-indulgence, pleasure, and then through labor, working long hard hours; and then through wealth and its acquisition.

It's an old, old text, but all that sounds an awful lot like what we do, today. We didn't write that song, we just popularize it, do our own cover versions. It's not as catchy as “Turn, Turn, Turn,” but it's accurate: The world is dying, as is every single one of us. Not a one of us who has even an ounce of wisdom can deny it.

But then there is this turn. There's this turn in the story of God's love for all that is under the sun, there is this turn, this thing of which it is said, “See, this is new!” God says this, “I am going to do a new thing.” God says to our old self, to all our old Adam: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit” God says, “I will enter into your days of pain, and vexations of work, and restless nights,” God says that to us through Jesus, the wisdom and power of God. Though we know that all is vanity, the foolishness of God is wiser than men. God enters into our life, and invites us to enter into his life in return: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

That's what we've come to hear, that's why we've come, to make that turn: to acknowledge all the ways that we are unsettled—within ourselves and without our world—and to learn another song. Because there is more to life than building bigger barns. Because there is more to this life, and beyond this life. Because this old world and we ourselves can and will become something new: a new heaven and a new earth. God is singing this song to us, and prompting us, teaching us, urging us to sing it, too.