

First Scripture Lesson: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Our first Scripture lesson this morning is attributed to the prophet Qohelet, otherwise known to us as Ecclesiastes. Amy Plantinga-Pauw, Professor of New Testament at Louisville Seminary, calls the wisdom literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes “Intellectual Ecumenism,” meaning that they were “developed and honed in the company of Israel’s ancient Near East neighbors.” Because of this, biblical scholars throughout history have been unsure of their place in the canon, and you’ll note that while this passage we’re about to hear is familiar, it does not appear in the lectionary. In fact, in the three-year cycle of the lectionary’s readings, Ecclesiastes appears only once. You might recognize this passage instead from the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn,” originally written by Pete Seeger and popularized in the 1960s by The Byrds. Dr. Bill Brown, a professor of mine at Columbia Seminary, notes that Ecclesiastes “depicts communal institutions, such as the family and government, on the verge of collapse or plagued with the withering effects of indifference.” Might we also relate to that, in our time?

This poem, again attributed to a poet named Qohelet, explores the rhythms of human life - particularly the essential aspects of human life. As Ellen Davis notes, this is not a poem that excuses *literally every matter under heaven*. She says, “there is no right time for oppression or wretched suffering, for foolishness or deceit.” Knowing “what time it is” in one’s life is a central part of wisdom’s discernment. Some of what we’ll hear lies totally outside of human hands - a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. This attention to the more mundane and essential aspects of human life is held in tension with verse 11, where we see that God has put a sense of eternity (ha’olam in Hebrew) in human hearts, what C.L. Seow calls “a consciousness of and yearning for that which transcends the present.” But we live in the present. We do all of these essential, human, earthy things in the present. We cannot live in the ha’olam, the eternity, we can just yearn for it, and make the best of the fleeting moments of joy and purpose we experience this side of forever. But, as Dr. Plantinga-Pauw continues, “the glory is found in the ordinary.”

Listen now to God’s word to us today, that we might consider the glory we find in the ordinary and discern the current season of our lives, through the immortal words of the prophet Qohelet, found in Ecclesiastes 3.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to break down and a time to build up;
A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn and a time to dance;
A time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek and a time to lose;
A time to keep and a time to throw away;
A time to tear and a time to sew;
A time to keep silent and a time to speak;
A time to love and a time to hate;
A time for war and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Second Scripture Lesson:

Our second scripture lesson this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31-40. This is often seen by most scholars as apocalyptic - or end times - literature. Now, by end times I don't really mean the Left Behind series kind of end times, where there's a rapture and all the good people are taken up into heaven or whatever. But instead, it's an eschatological end time, meaning what will happen when the earth is no more and heaven is forever, which is a very simplified definition of the study of eschatology.

As another of my seminary professors, Dr. Stan Saunders points out, this story is “a true parable, a puzzle that includes the kind of twists so typical of Jesus’s parables. Like many of Jesus’ most powerful parables, it is also a trap. Readers wander into it thinking that we will be able to figure out how to be counted among the sheep, only to discover that the very attempt locates us within the goat herd.” More on that in a moment.

This is the culmination of a conversation that starts way back in Matthew 24, when the disciples ask Jesus, “What will be a sign of your coming?” Listen to this Word to us from the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25 verses 31-40, where Jesus wraps up his answer to that question.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

I’ve spent these last few days off rewatching a favorite show of mine, NBC’s “The Good Place.” There are many twists and turns in its four short seasons, so I won’t spoil those here for you. Everything I’m about to say is revealed in the first few minutes of the first episode, in case you’re inspired to watch it, yourself.

The main character, Eleanor Shellstrop, played by Kristen Bell, has died, and an archangel named Michael, played by Ted Danson, is explaining to

her that she's in The Good Place. Yes, all of the world's major religious traditions were *kind* of onto something, and some people end up in The Good Place, and some people end up in The Bad Place. As it turns out, Michael aka Ted Danson explains, every single action - or inaction - of yours on earth has a point value, and if you reach a certain threshold, you end up in the Good Place. Eleanor had enough points from her life to make it, and thus the show begins. It's a show that will make you laugh, and cry, and think the big questions of existence and wonder about life's true purpose. One of the main characters is a professor of moral philosophy, and questions of ethics often take center stage. And wouldn't you know that a certain professor of moral philosophy by the name of the Rev. Dr. Richard Baker has never seen the show, even though several of us on staff have been trying to get him to watch it for several years? And listen, I'm not telling you that you if you've seen the show you should bug him to watch it, but I'm also not *not* saying that, either. But I digress.

The point is, while we as Christians don't believe in some utilitarian point system that determines your soul's place in the afterlife, we can sometimes fall into that pattern, anyway, especially when confronted with some of the most prevalent - and, incidentally, some of the worst - theology out there. Specifically, the topic of eschatology, which as I mentioned in the setup to the Scripture, is what we believe about not just the end times, but the *end of time as we know it*, what we might call God's kingdom here on earth, that knows no end, Alleluia and Amen.

This morning's gospel lesson can almost read that way. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." That easily turns into a list of things we check off, hoping that some effort might satisfy that tally mark for some undetermined amount of time until we start to feel like that magic dust of helping people has worn off and we need to do our part again, just to be sure that we're with the sheep gathered at God's right hand, and not with the goats, gathered at God's left.

I almost didn't preach this passage this morning, and I did actually cut out some of the worst of it. The lectionary text goes until verse 46, but I was too chicken to read it all on the first day of the new year, since it's kind of a bummer. Presbyterians - especially those of us in the Presbyterian Church, USA - don't always know what to do with these apocalyptic judgement texts. Don't tell anyone, but many of us are basically universalists when it

comes to the afterlife, and the idea that some will end up in the Good Place while others end up in the Bad Place doesn't vibe with our understand of a God whose very nature is unconditional love. But it's here, right here in the gospel of Matthew, that when the Son of Man comes, he will sit on his throne in glory and divide people to his left and right, the sheep from the goats. He will know the sheep - the righteous - as those who helped the least of these, and he will know the goats as those who didn't. Yikes. But as this is a parable, it isn't necessarily supposed to be read literally. For one thing, it corresponds to the Beatitudes which we see earlier in Matthew, kicking off Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. For another, this eschatological discourse is the culmination of that long-winded answer to the question, "What will be the sign of your coming?" Jesus gives a few answers to this question - one of which, famously is, "no one knows," but, as Dr. Stan Saunders points out, "in this parable we learn that the coming Son of Man has been present all along among the most vulnerable members of the society."

Love has come, and it never left.

Sometimes, in our desperation to be among the sheep, we inadvertently align ourselves with the goats. Motivated by fear over love, we convince ourselves that the best option is to circle the wagons, hoard our resources, and share only with a select few. But what Jesus makes clear in this parable from Matthew 25 is that the answer to the question, "What will be a sign of your coming," it is a vastly different ordering of our - and the world's - priorities. It involves not just sharing our resources, but freely giving away our blessings that others might also know of God's abundance.

Part of the wonder of Advent is that love has come and it never left. Part of the work of the Christmas season is to remember that we are an incarnate people, formed in the image of an incarnate God, and as such we have a holy responsibility to go and do likewise, serving the least of these because in them is the face and presence of God.

I'm reminded of a poem by the pastor and theologian Howard Thurman each year around this time:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins;
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

I find that this poem holds within it lessons from both of our Scripture readings this morning: after all of the fanfare, it is time to find glory in the ordinary as we live out Jesus's teachings on love and justice, namely: giving away our blessings.

The vast majority of us gathered in this room or worshipping from home are decidedly *not* the "least of these." For most of us, tightening our purse strings during times of national or global economic hardship means vacationing closer to home, or buying generic over name brand at the grocery store. We still have reliable shelter and transportation, and we don't have to choose between keeping our lights on or feeding our children.

But many, many people out there are making those kinds of choices today, maybe even right now. They're waiting in line at the food bank, sitting at the laundromat, riding the bus to one of their two or three minimum-wage jobs, and praying that God will help them through this hard time, so that their family can stay intact, or their water can keep running, or their kids can stay in daycare and not left to some other, less reliable, less safe option. How are we listening to God's Spirit calling those of us with means to help be an answer to their prayers? What season is Westminster in, and what is our collective New Years resolution? Might God be calling us to give away our blessings, anew?

One thing that the sheep and the goats have in common in this parable is that they're both surprised by the king's answer to each of them: the sheep who did to the least of these and the goats who did not. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, when was it that we saw you thirsty?" The sheep were not acting in a righteous way so that they could

be counted as sheep, but because it was simply the right thing to do, it was so a part of their nature that they didn't even know they were doing it. The goats, however, thought that their public displays of religious practice would save them, would be enough, that as they tallied their works, surely they, too, would be counted among the favored and chosen ones.

The quote on the front of your bulletins comes from the liturgy we're using today, including much of what Nancy and Caitlin have included in their prayers and responses. It comes from the Iona Community, and it's called "The Same Old Way? A liturgy for a new year." As part of the reflection, Thom Shuman writes about his litany of new years' resolutions that he revisits year after year, And he says, "It's always the same old things I am working at improving. there is no new thing on my list - that activity I have never tried, that event I have never attended, that place I have never visited.

We fall into the trap of thinking God uses the same list year after year, that God will always do things the way they have always been done. Yet, the New Testament reminds us that God is in the business of newness: new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem, new me, new you.

It shouldn't surprise us, though. Scripture makes it clear that God is always willing to risk, to dare, to think and do outside the box - to do something, everything new! And God wants us to be open to that new thing offered to us, to that new person who will enhance our life, to that new challenge which will make us grow, to that new opportunity we will have to serve. So let's tear up our old, dated lists and be open to that one new thing (probably more, but let's start with one) that God will do for us, to us, through us."

So, members and friends of Westminster, today I ask: what is that new thing that God will do for us, to us, and through us? Who is out there, right now, wondering if God will help them or even if God is out there at all, who might be blessed by us giving away our blessings? Who is hungry who might be fed, thirsty who might be quenched, naked who might be clothed, lonely who might be visited? Who is more in need of what we have than we are? And how might you - each of you - be a part of creating God's new kingdom here on earth, world without end, Alleluia and Amen?

The new year is kind of an arbitrary thing. Yesterday was 2022, today is 2023, the same sun still rises and sets. But it feels different, anyway. There is an energy that hangs around, that buzzes with potential, a momentum that begs to be seized. So let's do it. Let's think outside the box. Let's look at ourselves, at this building, at this community, with a new set of eyes, that God might do a new thing through us. Let's go into this new year ready to give as much as - if not more than - we've received.

For everything there is a season. What such time is this?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.