

You don't hear very many regular sermons on Ecclesiastes, although I think we used it for a couple Sundays a few summers ago. It doesn't come up very often in the reading schedules, and honestly, as you can see, it's a bit of a downer.

It does have a passage that's used often for funerals – it's that one that says there is a time for everything....the one that got written into a 70's song by Pete Seeger called Turn, Turn, Turn. We'll get to that one next week. There's another verse a little later on that I've preached for a couple of weddings.

We're going to spend the next probably three weeks on Ecclesiastes. I'm not sure about the rest of the summer. Summer sort of snuck up on me. If there are particular books of the Bible or biblical themes you'd like us to address, let me know ASAP. You could even send a message in the chat function right now.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a part of what's called the Wisdom and Poetry section of the Bible. It includes the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Job. The writer of Ecclesiastes is called Qoaleth, or teacher.

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are kind of a pair. They're like the yin and yang of the Old Testament.

Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings. It's filled with promises about how well things will go for you if you follow the path of wisdom.

Qoaleth is skeptical of that to say the least.

One of the commentators, Prof. Rolf Jacobson, compared the Proverbs to the classroom star – the kid who sits up front and cheerfully raises their hand to answer the teacher's questions...teacher's pet even. Professor Jacobson called Proverbs the Hermione Granger of the Bible.

Ecclesiastes on the other hand is Eeyore. Eeyore of course is that perpetually pessimistic donkey in the Winnie the Pooh stories.

I'm not someone who has struggled with chronic mental illness. I have had a couple of bouts of depression. The first one was when I was young and could have just been an extreme of teenage angst. I just basically put up with it until things got better.

The second was in my early 40's. That one was bigger. Eventually, a combination of counseling, spiritual direction, a career change, and finally a nine-month course of Lexapro did the trick and it really has never come back to any great degree.

During that bout I was on a three year journey of reading through the entire Bible. Ecclesiastes came up during that...I don't think it was too long before I made the decision to leave medicine.

I remember thinking as I read this first chapter of Ecclesiastes, wow...this is me. Who knew there was an entire book of the Bible written about depression and burn out? A book that talked about the sense of futility and emptiness that can happen with it?

So that's the first connection I want to make between Ecclesiastes and our world. Sometimes we are tempted to think that if we've got God, if our faith is strong enough, we shouldn't be depressed or anxious, or misuse alcohol or fall into drug dependence, or experience other even more severe mental illnesses.

But that's just not true. We know now that mental health comes from a complex interaction between our life's experiences, our current situation, and the balance of chemical neurotransmitters that function in our brains.

Faith can be an important component of healing from mental illness, like it is for any other illness. But there are also people specifically trained for treating mental illness. These helpers and their gifts are given by God for healing.

Mental health issues have increased as the pandemic and its fallout have ground on.

And in the last week, more social upheaval may exacerbate mental health problems even further. If you are someone who is struggling, I hope you are able to ask for help. You can always talk to me and we'll find a place to start.

But for all of us, this is a call to be kind and gentle with each other...even when we want to scream. How people respond to things right now can be a bit wonky as we deal with the stress of all that's going on.

OK, so, depression, at least in any kind of modern sense, probably isn't what Qoeth is writing about. But then what the heck is?

The book of Ecclesiastes is where we get the saying, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Perhaps a better way to capture it that fits with the message is that one day we will die, so for now we should eat, drink and be merry.

Ecclesiastes is a bit of a downer...but it also is a beautiful testament to living in the moment...enjoying the work God has given you and enjoying time with the people God has given you.

However, this first chapter doesn't get us there. The phrase all the way through the book is all is vanity and a chasing after wind. The word translated as vanity means something like mist or smoke. The New International Version of the Bible translates it as "meaningless."

However you translate it, it stands in stark contrast to our desire to do something that lasts...to be remembered...to be great.

There is a soul sickness that has infected human beings from the time of Adam and Eve...it's a soul sickness that leads us to believe that no matter how much we have, it's never enough...that we are being deprived... The serpent in the garden convinced Adam and Eve that God was holding back on them...that they should in fact eat the forbidden fruit so they could be more like God.

Adam and Eve are symbolic of the soul sickness that seems to have infected God's people from the very beginning.

That soul sickness tells people they need more and more wealth...that they need to make a great name for themselves...that they never have enough...that they never ARE enough.

So they seek to do great things...have their name be remembered...amass as much wealth as possible, no matter who or what suffers for it.

It leads to a world of winners and losers as the winners take everything they can, leaving others with truly not enough.

But in the end says Qoaleth, that is all meaningless and a chasing after wind. No matter how great you are, no matter what you did, eventually you will be no longer remembered and all the stuff you amassed will belong to someone else.

That is a sobering and humbling realization. Qoaleth writes as someone who has experienced what happens when we bump into the realization that in this life, we have limits and we are impermanent.

Really seeing clearly that so much of what we chase after doesn't end up meaning much can be painful.

Maybe that's even some of what is happening to us as a nation right now. As we chase after greatness, a virus brings us to our knees.

And a reminder that the result of our original sin of slavery is once again coming home to roost is causing anger and pain.

It's tempting to just wish it would all go away.

As much as a part of me wishes that, I'm also not convinced that hunkering down until it all goes away is the best approach. As people of faith, maybe the most important thing we can do right now is be present to that pain. To lean into it instead of trying to gloss over it.

Because when we refuse to stay present with the pain long enough for it to teach us, we just keep doing the same things over and over again...we keep chasing after the wind.

The lessons are hard to learn – as Qoaleth concludes this first chapter, he says with wisdom comes vexation and with knowledge comes sorrow. It is hard sometimes to look ourselves square in the eye. It is hard right now to look our nation square in the eye. An honest look at ourselves can bring vexation and sorrow...a realization that all too often we have been chasing after the wrong things.

My prayer is that we are gaining some wisdom...that we are gaining some knowledge...wisdom and knowledge that can bring true healing...a healing that will be worth staying present to the pain now.

So we will leave Qoaleth this week on a somber note. The rest of Ecclesiastes remains a gritty look at reality...but that reality is not all sorrow. As we go through it we will hear that it isn't all meaningless if we are looking in the right place and not just chasing after wind.

And of course Qoaleth isn't the last word on it all anyway. So we will leave with this promise of Jesus ringing in our ears – I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.