

Hanover International Worship, Febr. 17th, 2019, Sunday Septuagesimae, Sermon on Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) 7, 15/18

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

I do believe that artists may often be prophets. For instance, Bob Dylan, in 1964: The Times they're changing:

*Come gather 'round people wherever you roam
And admit that the waters around you have grown
And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times, they are a-changin'*

*Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide, the chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon for the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'
For the loser now will be later to win
For the times, they are a-changin'*

*Come senators, congressmen, please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway, don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt will be he who has stalled
The battle outside ragin'
Will soon shake your windows and rattle your walls
For the times, they are a-changin'*

*Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don't criticize what you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly aging
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
For the times, they are a-changin'*

*The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast
The slow one now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now will later be last
For the times, they are a-changin'
Bob Dylan, 1964*

In a contemporary American Bible translation, we read the last sentence of the Gospel in Matthew, 20, as follows: Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first.

The Great Reversal. Nothing else as another expression for the Kingdom of God. Remember Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes!

And now as the stage is prepared, the set done, let's remove the curtain.

Enter Qohelet, Ecclesiastes, the Gatherer, the Wise, the Teacher. Yes, literally translated, Qohelet is the one who gathers: students, a community, a congregation. But as he often uses the expression "I saw", we also may regard him as a collector of experiences, insights, observations: the source of his wisdom. Obviously, Qohelet lived and taught about 300 BCE, and lo, we are stuck in the middle of a time during which so much changed, apparently too much for many. Another Great Reversal.

Hellenism, Greek culture and language, Greek philosophy reached even the remote Jerusalem, which was connected to the world because of the temple, the central place of worship for Jews

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worldwide. The translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was in progress. But how to harmonize Greek philosophy, Aristotle, the Stoics, all that heathen, but alas, modern and attractive stuff with Israel's tradition, with the Law, the Prophets, the Covenant?

Juda and Jerusalem now were ruled by Alexander's followers, and there was one bloody regime change after the other between the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Antiochuses in Syria. The Holy Land just served as an area through which the armies marched, plundering, raping, living off the land. Economically many impoverished during these times and others came to wealth, as usual in times of war and change.

As the saying goes: When there is a wind of change blowing, some are going to set sails or to erect windmills, others are building walls. ("I'll have this wall built", end of Quotation).

Let's have a look how Qohelet positions himself and what he teaches his disciples or listeners. I am sure they often might have frowned at his ways of thinking. What did or do you think about his proposals?

At first, he cruelly tears down the traditional belief that all just people are rewarded during their lifetime with health, offspring, luck and happiness, and that all rogues and villains are punished with diseases, failure and an early death. No, Qohelet states, evidence proves that the opposite is quite common. Well, this is not new, we already had a lesson of that kind in Job.

But now this teacher takes at risks! *Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise – why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool – why die before your time?*

Sorry, but what is over righteous, overwise? Overwicked? And both attitudes seem to be rather life-threatening?!

Fearing God shall be a way between the extremes, a kind of happy medium? That sounds a bit dull, harmless, meaningless! Shouldn't we expect more from the Word of the Living God? Weren't in the end all those Rabbis right who doubted Qohelet's aptitude to be received in the Canon of the Scriptures? But Qohelet succeeded... Why?

Well, the pious are not rewarded, the ugly not punished. One could react furiously: there is no justice at all so I'm going to behave voluntarily as my greed and will direct me, without any consideration. On the other side I could decide to try to force justice by being totally and merciless righteous.

Both extremes, Qohelet says, I watched, and I watched them lead into death and destruction. This man simply remains unemotional. As a sage he well knows that excitement and anger lead to nothing good.

The Swiss pastor and writer, Kurt Marti, was dead right in writing that Qohelet immunizes against fundamentalism. In times of change fundamentalism is always tempting, but never a solution.

Fundamentalism is either a sign of or a path to a catastrophe. There is not only black or white, not only right or wrong. Traditionalism as well as libertarian or even libertine behaviour are egotistically motivated, they derive from fear for me. Both may well stem from fear of emptiness.

At present, in times of change, we observe lots of extremes unloading themselves aggressively in the papers, the traditional and modern media. Many people appear like pressure cookers under rather high pressure. Just take the term "political correctness". A dispute

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concerning the gender star (*!, a lesser problem in the English language!) may stir up storms. The same applies to topics as touching persons, looking at persons, dealing with LGBTQ persons, equal gender pay, the Brexit, Antisemitism, the lot. Why and where this hatred, which throws every convention overboard?

Don't be too correct, don't let it all hang out. Well, don't be evil, says Google. And Qohelet? The Jewish Study Bible thinks: Perhaps the point is more intellectual than practical: do not act as if you know completely and certainly what is right and wicked. Human beings do not have that wisdom. Only God does, who is the source of both good and evil.

Qohelet never would declare everything indifferent. *Μεδεν αγαν*, *μηδεν αγαν*, nothing too much, said Aristotle. The Greek philosopher also wrote: So every knowledgeable person will avoid excess as well as lack, he/she searches and chooses the middle. So, virtue is a middle as it is essential for it to aim at the middle. And Qohelet seems to follow!

In our ears and eyes mediocrity is something negative. Just average or below, dull, uninteresting, despicable, a cheap compromise. Qohelet and wide parts of antiquity were of the opposite opinion, as the quotations of Aristotle prove. And Qohelet himself gives the advice: It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes. Or, in Eugene Peterson's translation: It's best to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. The person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it.

No, indifference is not Qohelet's position. His problem is how to react - as a Jew, a Jewish thinker and sage, rooted in Israel's tradition - upon what the present time of change requires. Total conformity is no option, but remaining immobile means getting caught between a rock and a hard place. What kind of change is required in these times?

One solution is remaining, only passable and possible in fear of God and the consciousness of his presence. We may say goodbye to certain traditions, beliefs, habits, while sticking to our tradition. In awe before the Almighty, in love and obedience we feel kept, borne - and given the ability to differentiate between holding fast and letting go. We may let go as we ourselves are firmly kept.

"Just" could well mean "faithful to the Law", "too just" then would mean anxiously clinging to the law in fear of violating it only in the slightest trifle. Behind this anxiety there could well hide mistrust or fear of God - and a hidden option to take my fortune in my own hands should this thing with God collapse.

The other extreme, here expressed als "wicked", "being bad", "fool", is also softened by Qohelet. He knows very well: You can never live without any foolishness, any evil, any sin. But try to follow the Law, distance yourself from foolishness and evil. Know that in times of change you are living in an interesting experiment. In times of change let yourself be led by the fear of the Almighty. Look for wisdom, which consists in the love of the Almighty and His gracious will, His merciful Law. And don't make the Almighty and merciful a malicious demon.

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Don't be foolish. Don't try to be a warrior for something or somebody, at least a warrior for the Almighty. Don't think, don't fear that in times of change you may - or must - throw everything overboard.

Pecca fortiter sed crede fortius - sin strongly but believe stronger. So, in 1521, Martin Luther wrote to his scrupulous companion and friend Philipp Melanchthon.

Keep to the middle and believe that it is God's path. Even in times of change. It may require more strength than letting yourself be caught by extremes. With Daniel in this week's biblical saying we may pray: Prostrate we are before you and do not trust in our righteousness but in your great mercy. Amen.

And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in the peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastor Gerd Brockhaus, Marienwerder