

“Foundational Hope” – Eccl 3:1-13 – Jan 1/16

Happy New Year! It isn't often that we get to celebrate New Year's Day on a Sunday, so it feels rather special. It's a time of particular reflection, of looking back to the past and forward to the future at the same time, and it's also a day for worshipping God. It thus seems quite natural that one of the Lectionary readings for today is the somewhat famous passage from Ecclesiastes.

These words are especially familiar to those of us who are starting to mark the passing of New Year's Days in blocks of five and ten years. Back in 1965 (some would say “waaay back”) a group called The Byrds put out a hit song called “Turn, Turn, Turn” based directly upon the first eight verses of Chapter 3 – in fact the only words they added to those verses were “turn, turn, turn.” Mind you, I suppose it's not so remarkable that a song comprised of these verses could be such a hit – the wisdom poem that forms the bulk of the text was originally popular enough to be circulated on its own and was later incorporated into scripture. Popular poem – converted to scripture – converted to popular song – a perfect example of ‘turn, turn, turn’. Note however that the first scripture verse is not part of the poem – it is an introductory defining statement that for everything there is a season, and the poem that follows then provides fourteen concrete examples set out in opposites: born/die; plant/reap; and so forth. Some of you – especially those who remember that numerology played a large part in the cultures in which our scriptures were crafted – might have caught the number fourteen, recognizing it as two-times-seven, or a doubly complete sets of doubles!

If you have read the entire book of Ecclesiastes – and I ask you, who hasn't?! – you may recall that it is a seemingly dreary and pessimistic gathering of wisdom sayings and reflections. At the beginning we are greeted by another well-known expression of apparent futility - “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity”, and from there the tone gets progressively gloomier. You might want to ask why we would even look at such an apparently depressing text, especially on this day when we should be setting a positive tone for the year to come. And it's true – as we listen to the song, or read the words, or for that matter reflect on the events of the year just past, we could easily come to the conclusion that life is pretty much predetermined – where everything happens according to a cosmic script, everything recurs over and over, and we could conclude with a fatalistic sigh that “everything old is new again.”

But if you listen carefully to what the author of Ecclesiastes says as he or she expands following the initial wisdom poem, a different theme emerges. Now, to be sure, the author in his usual “the glass is not just half-empty but mostly empty – and probably dirty at that” style dourly contends that “all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil” – kind of a theological stiff-upper-lip, “pip, pip, jolly-good, hard work builds character” kind of message. At first reading it reminded me of the kind of dreary propaganda messages that the North Koreans blat across the border into South Korea with huge loudspeakers.

But underlying this somewhat dreary encouragement is a message of hope and reassurance. The point the author is trying to make is that there is purpose and meaning in life, purpose and meaning established by God. According to him, life is not merely a repetitive sequence of the same-old, same-old, but a highly-structured series of events set in motion and overseen by God. “God has put a sense of past and future into their minds”, he claims, “yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” In other words, we have been given smarts, but we're still not smart enough to understand all that God has done and is doing and will do. The flip side of that positing of the limits to human understanding is a comforting reassurance that the events of history are within God's grasp and control. Thank God that somebody smarter than humans is looking after the affairs of this world!

And there is another huge message of hope and reassurance here as well. Into this normal cycle of life, in which there is a season and a time for everything, there are also moments when God steps in to adjust the program for the better. The Old Testament witnesses to such saving events: Noah and his family; the saving of Isaac and the substitution of a sacrificial lamb; the disruption in Egypt as the Israelites break free; right through to the return of the exiles from Babylon. Each of these events is seen as an example of God's grace intervening in the 'normal' course of history.

And of course one week after celebrating Christmas Day we loudly proclaim God's mighty disruption in the endless cycle of seasons through the birth of Jesus, the Christ Child, Son of God, changing history forever. The hymns and carols proclaiming that birth may have faded from the shopping malls, but here in God's sanctuary and in our hearts the joyful news of Christ's arrival to demonstrate God's saving Love still evokes a chorus of thanksgiving and praise. We embark upon a new year, a time to look to the past with thanksgiving, and to the future with excitement – and always with the joy of life given and made rich by God.

The start of a new year has always been a significant moment for people, from the time they first understood that the seasons repeated themselves, probably as far back as when people first moved away from the equator and noticed the repetition of the sun's path. It has not always been a time of simple rejoicing, but usually a time of reflection. For example, the new year was almost always associated with judgment in old Judaism. This special moment was seen as an appropriate time to look back on how one had lived the past year, to reflect upon one's shortcomings and sins, and to make amends. Not a bad approach, for the start of a New Year is still an appropriate time to look back on the past year, to see how the way we have lived fits with the lifestyle to which we are called, and to formulate plans and make resolutions for the coming year. This particular moment is an appropriate occasion to recognize that our days are numbered, but that there is significant meaning in and to our lives, and that there is a way that Christ calls us to live. What better time than New Year's, with the fresh Christmas reminder of God's grace and forgiveness, to look back at the past year and remember not only what we accomplished but what Christ accomplished in us. What better time is there than today to look forward with excitement and anticipation, filling your heart with God's love and forgiveness and kindness and mercy, filling your heart so full that it overflows onto everyone you meet, spilling onto them the same kindness shown in acts of loving compassion.

With this rare intersection of the day of the Lord and the opening day of the New Year we have an opportunity to greet the promise of this New Year with our joy of being accepted by God in Christ. Truly we can anticipate enjoying God's gift, and eat and drink and take pleasure in all our toil, with good reason. We have come far in the past year with our various ministries, and with Christ's blessing and the help of the Holy Spirit we will continue to proclaim God's goodness through those ministries in the coming year. We have celebrated our faith together, and we will continue to do so. We have taken comfort from each other and from Christ's presence among us, and we live in the assurance that He will sustain us in our faith in the year, and years, that lie ahead.

All praise and glory be to the Father, who in his mercy has given us new life through his Son, Jesus Christ, and who enables us to live that life through the power of his Holy Spirit, One God.