

On the day of prosperity be joyful, and on the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other.
(Ecclesiastes 7:14a)

Koheleth is the sage who wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes. In English his name is variously translated as “the preacher” or “the teacher” or “the gatherer.” It’s the last of these possible translations that is my favorite because it is intended, I think, to be ironic. What Koheleth tries (but fails) to “gather” is wisdom. What he discovers, however, is that wisdom isn’t a commodity: it isn’t the kind of thing that can be accumulated and then held onto. It’s always more elusive than that. And so he concludes that all is *hebel*—another word difficult to translate into English. The traditional translation says that “all is vanity” but the word literally means something like *mist* or *vapor*. All is *ungraspable*, in other words, even for the gatherer! Since the most important things in life cannot be gathered they must simply be enjoyed.

We all know this at some level. This is not “revealed truth” that Christians or Jews have cornered the market on. Most of us can relate to that feeling of walking on Nauset Beach on a breezy August night when you say to the person you are walking with: “don’t you just wish you could bottle this up?” We wish we could gather it and hold onto it for a rainy day but of course we cannot. It is *hebel*—a fleeting moment we can enjoy or let pass by. Either way we will not have a do-over on that moment. This is how time is—an ever-flowing stream, and that is what Koheleth grasps (pun intended!).

It is, to a certain extent, the memory of such moments that sustain us in New England through the long, cold winter that lies ahead. But if we spend the next nine months nostalgic for the summer of ’64 or ’08—or waiting for the calendar to turn to August 2009—then we will miss 75% of what life in this part of God’s good creation has to offer us. The secret to life, with all due respect to James Taylor, was noted centuries earlier by Koheleth: the secret to life is enjoying the passage of time. There is beauty and truth in raking leaves on a chilly November day and a stark beauty that comes with that first winter storm. It’s the length of winter and the shortness of days I personally find challenging sometimes. But that doesn’t negate the fact that there is real beauty in each of the four seasons. And then just when you are almost ready to pack the family up and move south you see those first signs of spring again (I still don’t know are they crocuses or croci?) — signs of new life that bring with them joy and wonder and awe.

So Koheleth counsels his readers to be joyful “in the day of prosperity” or as my Jewish Publication Society Bible translates, “in the time of good fortune *enjoy* the good fortune.” *Enjoy* is one of those words that our Puritan ancestors didn’t quite know what to do with. It seemed sometimes to them that if you were enjoying life you were violating at least one or more commandment while doing so! Sometimes those feelings linger on when instead of enjoying the moments of prosperity we feel guilty. But the truth is that God has created us for joy and I wonder if the greatest sin of all is in not enjoying good fortune when it comes our way.

But all of life is not prosperity. We are rediscovering this as a nation as we navigate dangerous a dangerous economy. When two people stand before God and their families and friends and promise each other to be there as partners until death parts them, they promise to be there not only for richer but also for poorer; not only in health but in sickness as well. Koheleth invites us, in the day of adversity, to *consider*.

This may be harder to do than to enjoy. In the day of adversity it is easy to play the blame game. We're seeing a lot of that these days from Washington but it happens a lot closer to home as well. When the going gets tough, it's easy to get depressed and scared, and at some level if we aren't scared about the state of the economy right now we aren't paying close enough attention. But true wisdom is neither in being paralyzed by fear or whistling away like a cock-eyed optimist on the Titanic. True wisdom as my friend Robin Carlo reminded us earlier this month is about recognizing that we are not in control.

So in the day of adversity—in the midst of an economic downturn or facing chemotherapy or going through a difficult divorce (and they are all difficult)—it takes great fortitude and courage to *consider*. It's one of those words that I think the Zen masters have much to teach us about. But for us who are gathered here tonight it is Jesus who is our "Master." We are used to seeing him through the lens of the prophets like Jeremiah or Amos. We are used to seeing him as a Second Moses or a Son of David. But perhaps we have neglected (at great cost) the ways that Jesus is a kind of second *Koheleth*—a Wisdom teacher who says things like "*consider* the lilies of the field..."

People who are able to enjoy and consider—whatever life brings—are able to give God thanks in all things. True wisdom comes when we learn that we do not offer God thanks only for the blessings of our lives, but even for the challenges that help us to grow. People who both enjoy and consider are able to pray in their guts one of my favorite prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us. We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone. (BCP 836)

For those who divide the world into "sacred" and "secular" I suppose Thanksgiving falls into the category of a *secular* holiday. (Although the oxymoronic nature of calling something a secular *holy*-day may suggest that such divisions are false and probably not terribly helpful.) In any case, unlike Christmas or Easter, tomorrow does not belong to the Church. People from all walks of life will gather together tomorrow to ask the Lord's blessing and even those who rarely say grace will feel the need for some tug to do so on at least this one day. New immigrants and those who trace their lineage back to the Mayflower will gather with loved ones from near and far and pretty much sit down to the same menu. Even the most gourmet chef dares to mess with things only around the edges: perhaps a few dried cranberries in the stuffing or a dash of chipotle pepper in the sweet potatoes.

While the day may belong to the nation, however, the core theme is profoundly theological and has everything to do with the reasons we gather here tonight. We are a *Eucharistic* people: a people who are called "to give thanks." In fact I would say that we are most fully who we are called to be when we are saying "thank you." And that is what tomorrow is about. It's about cultivating gratitude, perhaps the truest and most profound expression of wisdom and spiritual maturity. It's about taking time tomorrow to *enjoy* the good stuff of our lives and to *consider* the harder stuff. And through all of it, to say "thanks be to God."

Happy Thanksgiving!