

First Presbyterian Church
Ecclesiastes 3:18-22; 9:1-10 “Death is Inevitable. So What?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/23/2025

[After the scripture readings about death...] Wow, do you feel that right now?

That is a heavy atmosphere. Some of you are thinking,
“My life has enough darkness and despair in it,
why did you just give me even more of it when I came to church?”

Well. That’s a good question.

Before I answer it, I want you to consider:
is the Teacher of Ecclesiastes (known in Hebrew as Qohelet) wrong?

Sure things: Death, taxes,
and the Blazers will never win another NBA championship.

Death is inevitable ... so why does this strike us as so demoralizing?

Qohelet is wise and we can learn from what he points out.
Denying our mortality moves us into a fantasyland existence.
When we deny our death, we ignore basic preparation of our affairs.
We stave off frank conversations with loved ones.
We refuse to accept diminishment that comes in stages:
time for a hearing aid, time to give up driving,
time to have assistance
with food and cleaning,
time to change our goals.

When we live as though we can keep ourselves going forever
we are also inclined to hoarding, greed, taking more than is needed,
protecting ourself and our group at all costs.

All these behaviors are in service of self-preservation within the fantasy
that (despite all appearances) death *is not* inevitable –
I can keep myself going with all these fancy tools we create.

In truth, it is meaningless to live without recognition of our own mortality –
and the mortality of those we love. It's hard, but we should just admit it:
everyone we know and love is going to die.
And we'll be there for it unless we die first.

Geez, what a downer.

Yes, I agree. But why? Why is it a downer?
Why do these statements impact us as they do?

I suggest it is because of what are sometimes referred to in the Bible as
“the *powers*.”

The Apostle Paul says in Eph. 6:12 that our struggle is not against flesh and blood
but against the rulers, against the authorities,
against the powers of this dark world
and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Rulers, authorities, powers of this world
and against spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms.

“The powers” is a catch-all phrase that describes earthly forces which
put pressure on humanity.

But, like humans, the powers aren't bad by nature!
God always intended for humanity to operate with
rulers, authorities and powers in this world.

If your life has ever been made better by having hospitals, schools, libraries, parks,
police officers, civil servants, first responders,
and freedom from marauding warlords,
then you have experienced the goodness of the powers.

Unfortunately, they fell into corruption through human sin.

And so the powers that should protect us are vulnerable to greed,
racism, nationalism, corruption, abuse, and coercive threats.

Can you guess the biggest threat the powers use to coerce us?

... Death.

“If you don’t give me your money, I’ll destroy your business.”

“If you don’t make me happy, I’ll take over your country.”

“If you don’t change to rules to suit me, I’ll destroy your organization.”

What else does a gun have to say?

What else does a tank, a bomber, or a nuclear weapon have to say?

What else does ripping economic and social supports (healthcare)
from vulnerable people have to say?

The powers rely on the threat of death – whether in part or in full –
to get their way.

And *that* is why I think these passages leave us feeling so down.

The powers are so good at making us fear death that we –

who belong to the God of all Creation,

who follow the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus of Nazareth,

who are filled with the eternal spirit of life –

even we are stunned

when we encounter the threat of death.

Qohelet is right that death is inevitable.

And he’s correct that in the face of life’s meaningless moments

and our inevitable demise, we may as well enjoy what we’ve got.

Eat good food, drink tasty wine, wear your fancy clothes, and love who you love.

After all, God has given these things to us. Why not appreciate what we have?

Fair enough. But seems that Qohelet speaks with a sense of resignation about this.
“Since death is inevitable, I suppose this is the best we can do.”

Jesus does not in any way contradict Qohelet.

He fully recognized death’s inevitability,
and he took it further than Qohelet did:
he also called us to die to ourselves.

Jesus says in Mt. 16, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

The apostle Paul says in Philippians 1:20,

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

So why do we think Qohelet is a downer, but Jesus and Paul are not downers?

Because there was something Qohelet did not yet know:

Death is not the end.

Qohelet wonders in 3:21, **“Who knows if our spirit goes down into the earth
from which we were made or if it rises up?”** It’s a good question!

Ancient Hebrew theologians did not have a well-formed doctrine of the afterlife.

God’s salvation was about the preservation and faithfulness
of the people of God.

God’s Messiah would fulfill the divine promise
made to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants
to restore the land and increase in number.

Their hope was rooted in the immediate world which God had made.

As Christians, we are also committed to to the immediate world:

we have hope in the new creation – a new heavens and new earth,
which begins in the here and now through the new creation of Christ
within us. A new me. A new you.

If I have died to myself so that it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me,
then what fear could I have of death?

A person with faith in Jesus who has died to themselves,
Can reply to Qohelet and the powers of this world:
“Yes, not only is death inevitable – I have already died.
I am united with Christ in his death on the cross.”

Our situation, caught between the powers (which shroud our vision with the
illusory threat of death) and the deeper truth of Jesus’ resurrection,
is captured in this wonderful parable told by Jacob Needleman
in his book, [*Lost Christianity*](#)

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their life with a purposeful energy; and since they were mid-life baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called “Getting All You Can out of Your Shell” and “Who Would You Be Without Your Nutty Story?” There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped out of the blue by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And to make things worse, crouched beneath the mighty oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing up at the tree, he said, “We ... are ... that!”

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but they continued to engage him in conversation: “So tell us, how do we ... become that tree?” “Well,” said he, pointing downward, “it has something to do with going into the ground ... and cracking open the shell.”

“Insane!” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.”

My friends, death is inevitable.

And it leads to something absolutely wonderful.

Our salvation, our freedom from the powers,
does not wait for us to die and rise again.

We know our salvation in the here and now
when we accept the truth that God has overcome death
in Jesus Christ,
and therefore the threats of the powers are completely impotent!

Do not fear the threats of those who wield power in corrupt ways.

They do not have the final say.

Death is inevitable. So what?

By faith we point ourselves toward death every day
because that is where the power of God is unleashed.

Don’t let the powers fool you with an illusion as though the goal
was to stay as we are for as long as possible.

Through death in Christ we are joined with something
so magnificent and beautiful and good,
we can scarcely imagine it.

That is our hope— in life and in death – today and forevermore.