

First Presbyterian Church
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 12:9-14, “What the Qohelet’s Going on Here”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/9/2025

An article in the Guardian Newspaper caught my eye this week.
It was entitled, “What is this era of calamity we’re in?”

The author, Matthew Cantor, writes, “Two months into 2025,
the sense of dread is palpable. In the US, the year
began with a terrorist attack; then came the fires that ravaged a city,
destroying lives, homes and livelihoods.

An extremist billionaire came to power and began proudly
dismantling the government with a chainsaw.

Once-in-a-century disasters are happening more like once a month,
all amid devastating wars and on the heels of a pandemic.

The word “unprecedented” has become ironically routine.

It feels like we’re stuck in a relentless cycle of calamity,
with no time to recover from one before the next begins.

How do we make sense of any of this –
let alone all of it, all at once?”

I’m going to wager that you had already forgotten about that terrorist attack,
and forgotten about the January 2nd attack on Bourbon Street.

You probably hadn’t thought about the LA fires for a while, either.
Because we’re flooded with stuff to be worried about every week.

The disruption happening nationally is substantial
whether you support it or not.

And layered atop the headlines is the challenge and difficulty
of our daily lives – which can be a huge burden.

The question Cantor asks resonates with me:

“How do we make sense of any of this – let al one all of it, all at once?”

Most of the Bible tells us that the world we live in is *explainable*.

The world was made by God and God has a purpose for it –
a purpose that we are included in because of the promises made to Israel
and fulfilled by Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection.
The book of Proverbs predicts that, ultimately,
the wise will prosper and the wicked will fall into their own traps.
We like that view of the world because it makes sense of *all this*.

But what about the times when life doesn't seem to make sense?
I grew up with a Christianity that always had to be positive,
always had to put the silver lining on the thunder clouds,
always wanted me to consider the good thing
that came from being bullied at lunch time.

Should we just keep forcing events –both personal life events,
and big picture events -- that feel increasingly calamitous, aimless,
and unpredictable into the same Biblical paradigm
that generally shapes our world view and gives us hope?

It a really tough question, because we do live by faith that God
is at work in the world and that, as the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:28,
“all things work together for the good of those who love God,
who have been called according to God's purpose.”
We should not abandon that perspective altogether.
That would be a “throwing out the baby with the bathwater”
kind of response.

But what if we just found a new conversation partner within the Bible?
It turns out that *within Scripture itself* there are contrasting testimonies
about what life with God is like.
They don't cancel each other out – they compliment each other
to provide God's people with a fuller, richer,
more nuanced way of understanding life with God
in the world God has made.

With this in mind, I thought, “What if we took some time during Lent to sit down and have a cup of coffee with the book of Ecclesiastes?”

We don’t want to stay there for the whole year,
but it might offer us some help when life feels nonsensical.

You see, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes has been there and done that,
and learned a few things that might shift your perspective
on all these “urgent crises” that call for your
moment-to-moment attention.

There’s no better way for me to introduce this mysterious
and sometimes confusing conversation partner to you
than to share a video from Tim Mackey at the Bible Project.

The Bible Project is a ministry that has videos on every book in the Bible
as well as important themes in the Bible
which explain concepts in wonderfully accessible,
visual way while relying on solid academic research.
So we’re going to watch one. It’s long, but it’s worth it ...
and it will explain my weird sermon title.

Bible Project Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrsQ1tc-2wk>

Now you can understand my sermon title: “What the Qohelet is Going on Here?”

My take is that Qohelet, the teacher, is not Solomon,
but a character invented by the author of Ecclesiastes to be Solomon-like –
someone who had the wisdom, resources,
and opportunity to explore everything under the sun, so that we,
the readers, don’t have to.

The author, the narrator who begins and ends the book,
seems to think that the words of Qohelet
are wise and worth paying attention to ...
but that there is also yet more beyond these insights.

As a follower of Christ, I say this:

Yes, life can be “hevel,” that is absurd, vaporous, an enigma.

Yes, we do get too caught up trying to control and predict
what is completely beyond our grasp.

Yes, it is maddening that bad things happen
to good people.

And yet, in the person of Jesus Christ,

I see that fearing the Lord and living in the way of Jesus’ sacrificial love
offer a way back toward meaning, for the foolishness of God
is wiser than the wisdom of humanity.

There is nothing more incoherent or absurd than the blameless Savior of the world
dying on a Roman cross for sins of others.

But this seemingly illogical act undoes the power of sin and death,
and becomes the polestar that guides us toward the heart of God
even in an inexplicable time like ours.

Another word about our Lenten spiritual practices:

This isn’t a law. It’s not about streaks or performance.

It’s just a nudge to be reminded that we are connected
to God and one another. If you’d like that, give it a shot.

And if you try but forget, don’t be a perfectionist,

because perfectionism is hevel, hevel, utterly hevel.