

Sunday February 14th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 7
Series: What If?
Sermon: "How Cheerful?"

I retold a joke a few years back that the late Henny Youngman used to tell and its one of my favourites, so I share it with you again. A man was walking down the main street of his town when a very long funeral procession, began making its way to the cemetery. It was a very odd procession given that there were two funeral hearses, followed immediately behind by a man walking a huge snarling dog on a leash.

Behind him there had to at least one hundred other men solemnly making their way to the cemetery. The man watching this and became very curious, and he walked up to the man walking with the dog and requested an explanation to the odd makeup of the funeral procession. "Well," the man replied. "My dog here, killed my wife and my mother-in-law". The man was startled but then regained his composure after a moment and asked, "Can I borrow the dog?"

To which the man replied, (You can see it coming can't you), "Get in line." I have long since lost count of the number of times I have tried to make the point that the reason we like to laugh at funeral jokes, or jokes about death, is that we believe it will somehow lessen the impact of our own mortality. Our reluctance to face our mortality is also one of the reasons many people refuse to go to a funeral visitation, or the funeral service itself.

I also think deep down inside, that one of the major reasons traditional funerals are becoming rarer, by making the event more of a party; we think we can avoid the messiness of the fact that we are all going to one day die. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes, makes no bones about our need to confront our mortality. After all, the death rate for humanity is 100%. And yet, as I pointed out with Howard Hughes last week, many people still die without a will, including, believe it or not, many lawyers, or they die without any funeral arrangements.

It is a selfish thing to do and very reckless, because this places a terrible burden on the surviving family members. Just before we moved to Simcoe, Laura and I prepaid and preplanned our funerals. Not because we are morbid, but because we recognize that someday our families will have to cope with our deaths. And dealing with the financial cost of a funeral ahead of time, not to mention the impact of inflation on funeral costs, provides for the inevitable.

Honestly, I wasn't sure how our children would react to this news, but surprisingly they were very relieved. Why? It was one less thing to worry about down the road.

It is a wise thing to prepare for this inevitability, but it is also a mark of wisdom to understand that as a follower of Christ, my life is not defined only by where I go when I die. Our lives with God are eternal, and that includes the here, and now, as well as the afterlife. With our mortality hanging over our heads, a truly wise person commits to living in ways that honour God, and give those who attend our memorials reasons to celebrate our lives.

The first wise thing we can do is cultivate a good reputation. The Preacher states that a good reputation is like a good perfume.

Sunday February 14th, 2021

We have an expression in English we use sometimes when meeting someone for the first time, “Your reputation precedes you.”

In other words, the nature of the person’s character was known before the person arrived, like the smell of a perfume before we see the one wearing the perfume. Also, the Preacher says, a wise person lives each day mindful of one particular day; the day of our deaths. The average person has about 27,000 days of life. 27,000 days to learn, to grow, to love, and to serve. Then it’s over. Once we die, our opportunities to really effect change in this world are gone. If we recognize the limited amount of time we have, we are more apt to spend our time wisely.

It’s like a modern GPS system where you punch in your destination, and that influences the route you take. If we know that death is the final destination of our earthly lives, that will influence the journey. So, how do you want to be eulogized? How do you want people to remember you? What difference have you made? No wonder Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21, “living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.”

The next piece of advice the Preacher gives sounds illogical. “Sorrow is better than laughter. Funerals are better than parties or festivals”. In our culture, for the most part, we love to celebrate our victories very publicly. Just see what happens every time our favourite sports team wins a series. “Everyone loves a parade”, the saying goes. However, as a culture, we tend to mourn our losses privately.

This trend to private grief is very problematic, because it leads to depression, substance abuse, and redirected anger and frustration. In the Preacher’s day, the rhythms of life held a place for public periods of mourning. The Biblical culture recognized that there was a time to grieve. Read the Psalms through, and see how many of them are actually songs of lament. Pretending that all is well for us, as individuals, or as a community, does no one any good.

If we do not learn to handle our sorrow and disappointments in healthy ways, we are fools. Just pay attention to most television shows, particularly dramas, and pay attention to how often characters in the script who are under some sort of pressure, say something like, “I could use a drink”, or they are portrayed as being drunk to cope with their pain. Not healthy, and certainly not helpful.

This next piece of advice on how to live a wise life, may be tricky to capture at first, but it is very useful. Essentially, the Preacher is telling us that both wise people and fools are happy to pass on their advice. If we want to live a good life, we need to close our one ear to the fools, and keep one ear open to the wise. But how do we know who is a fool and who is not. Well, the preacher gives us a kind of test.

He writes that a fool thinks everything is funny, or everything is a joke. They are likely people who tell us to lighten up at the most inappropriate times. Anyone familiar with the Simpsons TV show will note that the character Dr. Hibbard is portrayed like this, always laughing at inappropriate times. A fool treats serious matters with frivolity. Now to be honest, a fool can be a lot of fun when times are good. They can be the life of the party, but in difficult times they are downright annoying.

Sunday February 14th, 2021

The other thing fools tend to be, are like shooting stars. They are, at the beginning of a crisis, full of passion and energy, but they fade fast. They are not the people who will walk with you through the long dark days we all encounter. A wise person, the Preacher states, is also someone who realizes that shortcuts are actually dead ends. A foolish person will attempt to cut corners, up to and including unethical and illegal behavior. When we take a bribe, we reveal that it is money we truly love, not God.

It is very tempting, isn't it, when faced with the pressure of finishing a project, to try and get to the end quicker. There are a lot of excuses made as to why people feel it is their right to fudge billing hours, steal from the employers, skimp of the quality of materials. I ran across a little story about a lawyer who arrived at the pearly gates and was met by St. Peter. The man was informed that he would have to wait 82 years in purgatory before coming to heaven.

The lawyer demanded to know how that number was reached, to which St. Peter replied that the number was the number of hours he billed his clients. The Preacher continues by stating that finishing is better than starting. Almost every man is a great husband on his honeymoon. Every woman is a great mother on the day the baby is born. Starting is easy. It's the end that counts. A wise person knows that between the beginning and the end, there will be struggles, and with God's help they can get through them.

Even old king Ahab, that sinful king, recognized this truth in 1 Kings 20:11 "A warrior putting on his sword for battle should not boast like a warrior who has already won." I can clearly remember riding to school on the school bus, and talking with classmates about the beginning of our new minor church hockey season, and each of us bragging how great our respective team was, despite not yet having played a game or even having more than a couple of practices.

I was particular boastful on that bus, this despite the fact that at the end of the season, we only won two games, and lost many by a huge margin. It's how you finish. The Preacher goes on to say that a wise person is also slow to anger. Not only that, but I would add that their anger needs to be directed at appropriate things, like injustice and protecting the vulnerable. Not like me who says things I shouldn't when cut off in traffic, or when someone takes the last cookie.

I really like the advice in verse 10, because frankly I am tired about hearing people say that things were better in the "good old days". All of us know people who are stuck in a former time period. Most often it was a time in their lives when they were at their prime, or at least believed they were. To such individuals, anything that comes afterwards or is different, is not as good or valuable, and certainly not worth getting to know.

However, time is not static. You cannot go back. It's like when you are learning to drive a car. One of the first things instructors try to get you to do is to always look where you are trying to go. To look down the road. To try and drive by watching out the rearview mirror is suicide on the 403. There is no way you can move forward in your life with the Lord, if you are constantly looking back. This is why Lot's wife turned to salt looking back at a godless culture.

It's why Jesus tells us that when you put your hand to the plow you must look forward. Fools dwell in nostalgia.

Sunday February 14th, 2021

It is dangerous, divisive, and counterproductive to ever wish things could be the way they once were. Ever since the fall in Genesis 3, the only productive direction in God's plan is forward. The Preacher then goes on to say something positive about wealth; well, kind of. His point here is that in the rough seas of life you need two oars in your boat. You need wealth and wisdom. Wisely using wealth can help in taking care of many problems in life, but not everything. Wisdom is knowing when to use the wealth oar to turn your boat away from the rocks you can avoid.

A wise person also understands that God has two hands at work in our lives. God made us this beautiful world but because of sin, things have become: corrupt, imperfect, and crooked. Wisely living in this world recognizes that no one, and no thing is truly perfect. There are shadows in us and in this world. Imagine if you will, trying to climb a mountain. Logically you would think you could just start at the bottom and just make a beeline for the top.

However, we know that is not how it works. When you climb a mountain, you have to navigate some rough spots. Sometimes you actually have to climb down a bit to get a new angle of approach around a big rock or fissure. A trip up a mountain is one of meandering and switchbacks. It is the only way to avoid falling off or getting stuck. In life there are times when we can move forward, and yes there are times we have to move backwards.

The Preacher talked about this earlier. There will be times of prosperity, and times of poverty. Times of good health, and times of sickness. Sometimes, and I know I have often in my life, we pray that God will give us a straight, even path to follow, without having to step back or detour. The Preacher wants us to remember that God has two hands. Sometimes God is very active in our lives, and sometimes he is passive.

God does good things for us, and sometimes God allows difficult things to happen to us. But we need to accept both from God. I have mentioned several times now in this series that that was Job's approach wasn't it? "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" This is what faith looks like in the face of pain. We do not see the full picture of what God is doing but we trust him.

These kinds of experiences are what leads our faith to become sight. We need remember always, as the Apostle Paul states, that we see as through a distorted mirror. Our vision is limited, skewed, and self-directed. Finally, the Preacher concludes with what should be our approach to life. He commends us to enjoy prosperity while we can, because you never know when it can be taken away from us.

His point is that anything, and anyone, can be taken away from us at any time. This truth is very unsettling. This truth also leads us to make a choice in how to live our lives, and all of us, whether we recognize it or not, has made a choice. The good news is we can choose another path. Knowing that we can lose people or things at any moment, we could allow ourselves to become bitter, when we do lose someone or something.

We could also choose to never enjoy anything or get close to anyone lest it be taken away from us, or we could enjoy what and who we have for as long as we can.

Sunday February 14th, 2021

Then, when it is gone, we can be thankful to God for what we have. If one wonders just how deep the dissatisfaction runs in the hearts of society perhaps, we consider an experiment run by the Hayden Planetarium in New York City.

The Planetarium ran an advertisement in New York newspapers inviting those who would like to be among the first people to journey to another planet to submit an application. Within a matter of days, 18,000 people applied. The applications were turned over to a panel of psychologists, who examined the applications and came to a rather startling conclusion. The vast majority of those who applied wanted to start a new life on another planet because they were so discouraged by life on this one. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 37)

I've got news for you; you are not going anywhere. This planet is all we have. This life is all we have. God has given this life to us and has offered to walk with us, no matter what terrain we may encounter. You may not have a choice on which road you travel but you always have a choice about who travels with you.