

We don’t often get a chance to consider the wisdom presented in Ecclesiastes on a Sunday morning. Most often, these words come to us at a funeral service – or on an oldies radio station. The Byrds (who made it a hit) and Pete Seeger (who put the words to music) gave us something to consider in the turbulent ‘60’s, but the message was much older – and has proved more enduring – than any of them might have imagined.

A quick reading of Ecclesiastes can feel like something very modern – from the opening complaint that ‘all is vanity.’ The text raises the suggestion that the world, and everyone in it, is going to hell in a hand cart; and there is a sense of frustration and disappointment with our inability to figure things out. The world is mostly orderly. Our lives are too often a confusing mess. The search for wisdom is more apt to raise questions than provide answers. Efforts to educate (self or others) are stymied by unknown motives (or blatant indifference.) The author is wondering what might happen for whoever follows in the footsteps of that icon of wisdom – good king Solomon – and the prospects are bleak... but for the goodness and generosity of God.

It must be said: Solomon is the subject of this book. He was not the author. The author is using Solomon’s glorious reputation as a metaphor. Concerned with the path humanity may take, they would use this book to provoke their audience into considering a more faithful way to navigate the complications of life.

Now, it is sometimes the case that a quick reading of Ecclesiastes can lead people to make a conclusion that seems faithful, but is really anything but.

Too many times, I have been met by folks who nod and smile (usually after a funeral – and almost certainly after a sudden, tragic, or unexpected death) and say – ‘ah, yes. God makes things happen for a reason. It was their time to die.’

I quite often nod and smile and lay a gentle hand on the shoulder when someone claims this as comfort. There is a time for expanding understanding, and a time for leaving well enough alone, and the funeral lunch is not always the best place to remind people that grief is sometimes random and horrible and hard to explain. But today I will tell you that while it is certainly true that ‘everything happens for a reason,’ it is not true that the things that happen are always part of some grand plan of God – which perversely includes sudden, tragic, and unexpected death.

Scripture never (in my study, at least) tells us that God’s plan includes, requires, or demands our suffering. Scripture does tell us that ‘For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.’

So, what’s the difference? I’m glad you asked.

Everything DOES happen for a reason. The universe is very committed to the relationship between cause and effect. Things happen because things happen – whether you believe in God or not.

Now, those who believe in God are inclined to credit God (and only God) as the mysterious force behind all activity – and there’s nothing wrong with that – so long as we also admit that God’s motives and intentions are bent toward comfort, compassion, justice, and joy. God desires good outcomes in all things, for all folks for all times.

The wild-card in this ‘all things happen for a reason’ argument is us. **Human causes drive different effects, many of which are contrary to the common good.**

We are constantly throwing the system out of balance, just as God is constantly working to bring balance. Sometimes (most times) our work and God’s work are not equally distributed. We are not more powerful than God, but our widely various efforts make the resolution much more complicated...even for God.

The tonic for this wobbling relationship between ‘what is’ and ‘what God intends’ is offered in the third chapter of this remarkable book. For everything there is a season...

The author, already convinced that uncertainty and instability is part of what we must navigate, speaks the cycle into balance. This very well-balanced poem – pairs of situations that are clearly opposed – helps us visualize the broad cycles of life. Good and bad – constructive and destructive – yin and yang – one follows the other; each requires the other, in an eternal cycle that reaches beyond our petty complaints.

The lesson is not ‘life is hard and then you die,’ but ‘life is hard, and then wonderful, and then complicated...and through it all, God is God.’

The notion that God has determined the course of our lives is less important to the author of Ecclesiastes than the understanding that God is a constant presence and potential source of comfort throughout the changing and often baffling patterns of life on earth.

That constant presence offers itself in countless ways. And at this point in the journey, we have been invited to add Jesus’ story to the story of our struggle.

Where Ecclesiastes mourns our ability to ‘find out what God has done from the beginning to the end...’ Jesus reminds us that God alone knows ‘the day and the hour...’ – when we cannot (or will not) recognize the signs of God’s wonder and grace, the fullness of time is held precious (and safe) by God who knows all.

Jesus invites us to ‘eat and drink and take pleasure in all our toil...’ – to love neighbour and self, and God in all we do. Jesus calls us to trust God as we navigate the inevitable – as we move from birth to death, breaking down and building up, weeping, laughing, finding, losing – secure in the knowledge that God has all time well in hand.