

Today's scripture lesson comes from the book of Ecclesiastes, which is part of the Bible's wisdom literature and has two voices: the author and the teacher. One of the overarching messages that the teacher presents repeatedly is the concept of "Hevel." Everything is utterly "Hevel." Most English Bibles translate this word, Hevel, as "meaningless" or "pointless," but that doesn't capture the heart of the idea. In Hebrew, "Hevel" means vapor or smoke. The teacher uses this word 38 times as a metaphor to describe how life is temporary or fleeting, like a wisp of smoke. Also, life, as we know it here on Earth, is an enigma or paradox. Like smoke, it appears solid, but when we try and grab onto it and make sense of it, it passes through our hands. There's so much beauty and goodness in the world, yet tragedy can strike at the same moment. We all have a strong sense of justice, but bad things happen to good people all the time, and there are no guarantees; these things are "Hevel." So, life is unpredictable, but the teacher of Ecclesiastes says that life is "Hevel," and trying to be in control is like chasing smoke or vapor or "chasing the wind." (Eccl 1:14)

So, what's the way forward amid all this "Hevel?" Paradoxically, the teacher discovers the key to true enjoyment of life under the heavens, or life as we know it here on Earth: It's accepting Hevel. It's acknowledging the paradoxes and enigmas of the good and bad and taking them for what they are while trusting in the goodness of God.

Our scripture this morning is from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, vs. 1-8, and I want you to listen to the beautiful and brokenness that coexist in the world that we live in, under the heavens: Let's hear a word from the Lord, but first, let's pray...

Eccl. 3:1 ¶ There's a season for Everything

and a time for every matter

under the heavens:

Eccl. 3:2 ¶ A time for giving birth

and a time for dying,

a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted,

Eccl. 3:3 ¶ a time for killing and a time for healing,

a time for tearing down

and a time for building up,

Eccl. 3:4 ¶ a time for crying and a time for laughing,

a time for mourning

and a time for dancing,

Eccl. 3:5 a time for throwing stones

and a time for gathering stones,

a time for embracing

and a time for avoiding embraces,

Eccl. 3:6 a time for searching

and a time for losing,

a time for keeping

and a time for throwing away,

Eccl. 3:7 ¶ a time for tearing

and a time for repairing,
a time for keeping silent
and a time for speaking,
Eccl. 3:8 ¶ a time for loving and a time for hating,
a time for war and a time for peace.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

You may remember that we are following a sermon series this summer called bumper sticker theology. These are the things that people say to others, usually in times of immense challenge or pain, and they are well-meaning but utterly unhelpful and probably even harmful. So, we are discussing these common phrases and sayings this summer, which are challenging discussions. And so, let's embrace these tough discussions together because they are certainly worth having, with the acknowledgment that we might not agree on all points, and that's ok because trying to control one another in this space would be "Hevel."

Today's bumper sticker is "Everything happens for a reason." When things happen that are wonderful and bring us joy, hope, and peace, things like births, sewing seeds, healing, building, and laughing, we happily acknowledge that these happen for a reason, and the reason is that they are gifts from God!

But what about the bad things? Things like sickness, physical and relational deaths, murders, hate, and wars? No life is without struggle and hardship, and in the aftermath of tragedy comes the arrival of a couple of questions:

1) Why?

2) God, are you here?

These questions have enormous weight and urgency. We cry out to God from the groaning of our hearts and try to get quiet enough to listen for God's answer, but it's so often drowned out by other voices saying things like, "Everything happens for a reason."

These quips that people want to say in times of difficulty to avoid the awkwardness of silence can land like buckshot that perforates the hearts, minds, and souls simultaneously. We are compelled to rationalize what we don't understand, and we conclude that we are experiencing pain and physical and relational death because we must have done something to deserve it. And if we didn't do anything to deserve the tragedy in our lives, then we must be unlovable humans with an, at best apathetic God, or at worst, a God that is not good.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been in this space asking Why? Are you here, God?

Do you care?

I have.

About six years ago, I experienced relational death that brought me to my knees in the form of divorce. I experienced the joy of becoming a new parent and the difficulty of becoming a single parent over seven months. I didn't see it coming. Friends, I was in immense pain, mourning the relational death of what I believed was once alive, and in disbelief. The life that I knew was over in a phone conversation. Plans, hopes, and dreams were now like a vapor, still visible but not tangible. What would I do next? I had no idea. I'd cry out to God, asking, "Why?" Had God caused this pain? Did I deserve it? Was God trying to teach me a painful lesson by "closing doors and opening windows?"

I searched the scriptures for answers and comfort and landed in our scripture lesson for this morning. I read Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 and found comfort in the honesty about life's seasons because, yes, I was in pain, but there was hope of relief. I meditated on verse three and wrote on a note card, "A time to build," and taped it to my bathroom mirror. I felt like my life was in shambles, but I knew from reading and understanding the overarching message of the Bible that God is love and brings restoration. It may not ultimately happen "under the heavens," as Ecclesiastes' teacher says, meaning this side of heaven in our world. Complete restoration may only happen in the life everlasting, but friends, God restores life. We have evidence of this through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the words of one of our beloved volunteers and church members, "God is incomprehensible love."

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen said I quote: "...The resurrection expresses God's faithfulness to Jesus and to all God's children. Through the resurrection, God has said to Jesus,

'You are indeed my beloved Son, and my love is everlasting.' And to us, God said, 'You indeed are my beloved children, and my love is everlasting.' The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. It reveals to us that; indeed, love is stronger than death." End Quote.

Friends, God is incomprehensible love.

But why the tragedy? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why mass shootings and school shootings? Why are so many struggling in cycles of addiction? Why divorce? Why cancer? Why sickness? Why death? Why, God, why?

I believe Everything happens for a reason, but it's not because God makes it happen. God does not participate in brokenness, but until Jesus returns in final victory, brokenness exists in the world under the heavens. Humanity created brokenness, not God, but God is with us in the brokenness. God is with us, offering new seeds of life through people of peace and eventually in everlasting life. God is with us.

Yes, we have tragedy in life under the heavens. No, God is not the cause of that tragedy. The tragedy results from the world's brokenness, but I want to clarify that God is in the world too. Several months ago, we observed Maundy Thursday, and as part of that service, we experienced a traditional Seder meal led by pastor Elaine and her husband, Barry Nocks. Part of the meal was to taste bitter herbs and charoset, a very sweet apple dish, in the same bite. We

used horse radish for the bitter herbs, and pastor Elaine prepared the charoset. As I prepared my fork with the bitter herbs and the charoset, I prepared myself for what I thought might not taste very good because of all the bitterness... but it was still Good. The bitterness didn't overpower the charoset, just as the brokenness of this world cannot overpower God's love. As broken as our world can be, God is in it, and it is still good.

Joy persists because God is with us. Author Kate Bowler writes about her experience with cancer, and she says, " At a time when I could have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus." (Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I've Loved: Kate Bowler)

Kate Bowler explains further that she was experiencing an intense connection to God that St. Augustine called "the sweetness" and Thomas Aquinas called "the prophetic light." She explains that the intensity of those feelings of connection with God during a severe struggle would fade somewhat, though not entirely, but that the reality of a present God forever marked her.

Yes, God is with us. God is incomprehensible love. Yesterday, many women in our community came together for a retreat, and Bronwyn White led us in working in clay. Before we started, pastor Elaine led us in a mindfulness meditation that reminded us that while we

participate with God, God is the life-giver. We spent some time reflecting on Second Corinthians 4:7 "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." Clay jars were common when this scripture was written but often had precious content, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or other valuables like money. We discussed that we are like the unsuspecting, somewhat fragile clay jars filled with God's love, and out of the overflowing love from those jars, we love one another. I share this with you because, after our retreat, one of our participants stayed for a bit and said before she left, "This place represents God's treasure in my jar of clay." In times of struggle, she found people of peace within the Body of Christ, planting seeds of new life and mirroring the face of Jesus. Yes, God is with us.

The teacher in our scripture lesson in Ecclesiastes acknowledges that tragedy exists in our world "under the heavens": death, killing, tearing down, weeping, mourning, isolation, loss, hate, war... but also that those things coexist with birth, healing, building, laughing, dancing, embracing, seeking, love, and peace. Life is so hard. Life is so beautiful.

The teacher in Ecclesiastes says that we should accept "Hevel," meaning that we understand that there is much that is out of our control and, at the same time, trust that God is good and that God is with us and working within us so that we might mirror the face of Jesus to one another. In the book of Ecclesiastes, in some of the bleakest moments in the teacher's monologue, he talks about the "Gift of God, which is the enjoyment of simple good things in life like friendship, family, a good meal, or a sunny day. We can't control these things, but that's

their beauty. When we adopt a posture of trust in God, it frees us to appreciate our lives as we experience them, not as we think they ought to be. Because even our expectations about what life ought to be are ultimately "Hevel."

Friends, everything happens for a reason, but it's not always because God made it happen. God does not participate in the brokenness of this world. God doesn't will tragedy. But God's presence and goodness are in the midst of it all. God's presence is often demonstrated through people planting seeds of new life and mirroring the face of Jesus, whose resurrection reveals that love is stronger than death and that we are indeed beloved children of God. Yes, God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.