

“A Faith for All Seasons”

a sermon by

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**Texts: “Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and to the wicked, to the good and to the evil.” (Ecclesiastes 9:1-2)
“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purposes.” (Romans 8: 28)**

There are two verses in Scripture that I would like to hold before you this morning, two verses that represent two very different ways of looking at life.

The first view of life is spoken by the writer of Ecclesiastes: “All things come alike to all: to the righteous and to the wicked, to the evil and to the good.” That is a word of cynicism, disbelief, and despair.

The second view of life is found in Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who loved God, who are called according to his purpose.

I.

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most unique books in the entire Bible. Over the years many people have wondered how this book became a part of our canon. In many ways it seems so pessimistic, so negative, so filled with hopelessness and despair.

The theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes is found in the first verse of that book. “Vanity of vanity,” says the preacher, “all is vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)

The Hebrew word for vanity is the little word “hebel” which means “breath, wind, or vapor.” That word is an apt description for Ecclesiastes. We are all nothing but “breath, wind, or vapor.” Our lives are nothing more than a small breeze that blows and then it is over. “There is nothing new under the sun,” observes Ecclesiastes. “All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.” “What has been is what will be, and that which is done is what will be and there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11)

That is the pessimism that runs through the entire book of Ecclesiastes. “The same fate that befalls the beasts infects men and women alike.” We all die.

Ecclesiastes is right about one thing. There is an indiscriminate impartiality that affects everyone regardless of moral character. When tragedy strikes, it has a way of striking all – good and bad, righteous and wicked. That stubborn fact has been a stumbling block to faith for multitudes of people across the ages.

Long ago, on Calvary stood three crosses. On one of them was a profane and blasphemous thief. On another was a thief who was ashamed and penitent. On the third was the greatest spirit that ever blessed the earth. Yet, in the end, all three died.

So let’s be honest. Ecclesiastes’ point should not fall on deaf ears. All things come alike to all.

II.

But there is a second point of view that is expressed in Scripture and it is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans, “All things work for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28) All things!

Now, surely there is someone here who thinks that Paul must have led a pretty sheltered life to be able to say that. But Paul did not lead a sheltered life.

Listen to his own words in II Corinthians, “Five times,” he writes, “I received from the Jews the forty stripes save one.” Three times he was beaten with rods. “Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” (II Corinthians 11: 24-29)

I think that Paul could say with Ecclesiastes, “All things come alike to all,” but for Paul it wasn’t the whole truth. The whole truth for him was that “all things work together for good for those who love God.”

Is there any question that could plunge us deeper into the fundamental problem of our lives, namely, how we will deal with the hardships that come our way?

There is a verse in the Book of Romans that has often caught my imagination where Paul writes, “Experience produces hope.”

Yet, that is precisely what experience doesn’t do in many people’s life. It produces disillusionment, cynicism, and despair. How many people do you know who start out in life confident, eager, and hopeful? But when difficulty, suffering, and defeat come upon them, suddenly experience does not produce hope.

So what are we to make of Paul, living not an easy life but a difficult one, facing “all things?” Yet, he speaks about being strengthened in the inner person, about learning how to abound

and how to be abased, and about being able to do all things through Christ who strengthened him? What is the secret of that kind of life?

III.

For one thing, Paul must have understood that Jesus himself faced the difficult impartiality of life. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus observed that “The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.”

Certainly all of us understand this. When a recession such as the one we face today comes upon a nation, we all suffer. There are some things that affect everyone alike. Jesus was right. The rain falls on the just and the unjust, the good and the bad. But here is the point. Just because something bad happens to a person does not mean that person is being punished for sin.

Jesus dealt with this kind of thinking his entire ministry. Once the tower of Siloam fell and crushed a group of men, and the rumor ran up and down the streets of Jerusalem that these were the most wicked men in the city. But Jesus said, “Those eighteen, upon whom the tower fell, do you think they were worse offenders than others that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, no.”

And when his disciples brought to Jesus a man who was born blind and asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” Jesus responded by saying “Neither did this man sin nor his parents.”

You see, there are some things in life that affect people that have no apparent moral meaning. Ecclesiastes is right in that regard. All things come alike to all.

IV.

But, there is more to the matter. While it is true that there is certain impartiality to life, it is not an absolute impartiality. It is true that all of us die, but the legacy that people leave is not the same.

That past week I viewed the movie “Frost/Nixon” which recounts the famous interview that took place between David Frost, a British talk show host, and Richard Nixon, who had resigned the Presidency in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal in 1973.

There was a great deal of apprehension about this interview. After all, David Frost was viewed as a kind of lightweight. He was a dilettante and a ladies’ man. He was a popular talk show host, not an investigative reporter.

Richard Nixon, on the other hand, was a very intelligent and shrewd man who was elected to the Presidency in 1972 by a landslide only to squander away the presidency through a deep insecurity and paranoia. In many ways Nixon accomplished as much in foreign policy as any president in recent memory. But in the end he will always be remembered for the crimes committed around the Watergate Scandal.

Not all things come alike to all people. There are some things over which we have control. There are certain decisions that a person can make that can lead to great tragedy. Other decisions can lead to great success.

Jesus and Judas Iscariot both died on the same day. But they did not both leave the same legacy. There are some things in our life over which we have no control. But there are some things over which we do have control.

V.

But, there is another thing that must be said if we are to understand the profound difference between the writer of Ecclesiastes and the Apostle Paul and it is found in the expression “for those who love God.”

Is not that the real difference between Ecclesiastes and Paul? The writer of Ecclesiastes takes a very negative and cynical view of life. But Paul is positive, creative, and confident about life. It is not that Paul does not understand that bad things happen to people, but he does believe that it is possible to transmute evil into good.

That is a witness one finds throughout Scripture. In the story of Joseph in the Old Testament one finds a young man who experienced a tragic hardship. His brothers were jealous of him because he was his father’s favorite. So one day they captured him in the fields and sold him into slavery to a group of Midianites who took him to Egypt. Eventually, Joseph became the Pharaoh’s most trusted advisor. One day, when there was a famine in Israel, Joseph’s brothers were forced to go to Egypt to seek food. Unknown to them they encountered their brother Joseph, whom they believed to be dead. When he told them that he was their brother Joseph, they were terribly frightened. After all, he had every right to kill them.

But Joseph recognized in these events the hand of God. “You meant it to me for evil.” said Joseph, but God meant it for good.”

That experience was echoed in Paul’s life. You can see it in his letters. The earlier letters of Paul like his letter to the Galatians and to the church in Thessalonica are quite good. But in his later letters, such as Philippians and Ephesians, there is a shift. Both of these letters were written from prison. He knows his life is coming to an end. But there is a note of triumph in them. “Rejoice in the Lord,” he writes. “I will rejoice in the Lord always.”

As we come to this season of Thanksgiving, all of us need to take note of the spirit in which Paul wrote this great letter to the church at Rome.

To be sure, there are some terrible things that have happened in our midst. People have lost jobs, families have lost loved ones, and some families have had to move to find new jobs.

But, even in the midst of all of this, there is much for which to be grateful. There is our faith, and that will not fail us.

George Matheson was a well known minister in the Church of Scotland some years ago. As a young man, he had a promising career ahead of him. But suddenly he was afflicted with a great illness and he began to lose his eyesight.

His whole life was collapsing around him. He felt he had to resign the parish he served. His fiancé rejected him because of his blindness. He believed that all was lost. Yet, the Presbytery he served refused to accept his resignation. So he continued, engaging in a remarkable career.

Toward the end of his career he wrote a hymn that summed up much of his life:

“O love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give Thee back the love I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

Surely that is a faith for all seasons.

Amen.