

Hope for the Hopeless

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on October 14, 2018

This morning we are turning to the sixth sermon in our ten part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. Written by Solomon, Ecclesiastes is the reflection of a king of Israel near the end of his days where he ponders the meaning of life. Today's reading is from Ecclesiastes, chapter six, verses one through twelve.

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

6 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: 2 those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill. 3 A man may beget a hundred children, and live many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. 4 For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; 5 moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. 6 Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good - do not all go to one place? 7 All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage have the wise over fools? And what do the poor have who know how to conduct themselves before the living? 9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a chasing after wind. 10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what human beings are, and that they are not able to dispute with those who are stronger. 11 The more words, the more vanity, so how is one the better? 12 For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?

In the days of Julius Caesar, Marcus Tullius Cicero, the great Roman statesman and orator has been quoted as saying: "politicians aren't born, they are excreted." These memorable words, which were spoken by a man who had served in office all his life, at the highest levels, in the most powerful government in the world, reflect a dark truth that has been observed throughout the ages. In the game of thrones, where everything is always on the line, it is a dog eat dog world, that turns intelligent, compassionate, and civilized people into vicious animals. In the game of thrones there is a great darkness that overshadows all the glory and splendor that surrounds its key actors. As a case in point, Cicero, was eventually defeated by his political adversary, Marc Antony, who put his severed head and hands on display in the Roman Forum.

In today's Scripture reading this morning, we find King Solomon reflecting on the dark realities that haunt the souls of those who have been granted power. Based on his own personal experience of the intrigues that he had witnessed over his lifetime, in his father's royal court, as well as in his own, and also drawing upon his awareness of the backroom dealings

that he had heard about in the other great kingdom halls of the world, Solomon gives us insight into the issues that keep the rich and powerful up at night.

In verse two of today's reading, Solomon laments that God does not enable those whom he gives wealth and possession and honour to enjoy all that they have been given. In fact, Solomon goes so far as to say that a still born child is better off than a rich ruler who has a hundred children and lives a long life; even for thousands of years.

As he writes these things, I have to presume that Solomon is speaking first and foremost about his own life. After all, his life matches the description of the pitied person he describes quite well. Making the parallels between the two, Solomon had lived a long life, and it would seem plausible, if not probable, that with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines that he fathered over one hundred children.

And yet, with all his blessings, Solomon was not happy. Even though he had everything, he was not able to enjoy it. Which begs the question, why? What cloud could possibly be hanging over the most prosperous king of Israel who experienced a reign that was marked by peace?

Well, for starters, let's consider the details of his birth. Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. This means that his life was the product of two grievous sins. Now, stop and think about this for a moment. How would you feel if you knew that your father had abused his power as king in order to commit adultery with your mother, and then he murdered her husband, who was a righteous and mighty man of valour, in order to cover up his sin. As a good Jewish boy, who firmly believed in the Ten Commandments, how would you feel about your life knowing that your life was the product of breaking two of the foundational laws upon which God's people were to be established?

Furthermore, how would you feel if you encountered the members of Uriah's family who were still alive? As a young boy, or even as a man, had Solomon met Uriah's parents, or siblings, or perhaps Uriah's children that had been born through his mother on the streets of Jerusalem, that sure would make for an awkward moment.

While the Bible says nothing on the matter, I am sure that Solomon was bothered by the reality behind his existence for all of his life. As a God fearing man, how could he not?

Secondly, in addition to being troubled over the lives that were destroyed in order that he could be brought into existence, I am certain that Solomon was troubled by the lives that had been destroyed by innocent decisions that he had made as king. This is the burden of leadership that even the most competent and honourable leaders must carry. For example, if you practice

medicine, the price of healing others is bearing the burden of knowing there are people whom you have harmed and perhaps whom you have killed despite your best efforts. The price of practicing law is knowing that innocent people will be punished, and guilty people will be not be brought to justice because of your mistakes or shortcomings. The price of engaging in ministry is knowing that there will be people who will be harmed in their faith development on account of our attempts to serve God. This is the burden all leaders must bear. And the greater the office, the greater the burden.

This means that as the leader of a nation, even under very favourable conditions, it would have been impossible for Solomon to lead Israel without making decisions that would harm or destroy the lives of at least a few honourable citizens. This is a difficult reality to deal with. And I am sure Solomon recognized this burden and that it was partly responsible for the darkness that he expressed in today's reading from Ecclesiastes, chapter six.

In addition to this, I believe Solomon was troubled by all the dark deals that he had made throughout his reign in order to stay in power. While he had played the game of thrones very well, his lifetime spent in the political cesspool of entitled individuals fighting for bigger pieces of the public pie had destroyed his heart, even as he accumulated great wealth and power in the process of playing the game.

As I think of his struggle, it reminds me of one of my favourite political movies, "The Ides of March." In this movie, which is entirely based on real experiences on the campaign trail, the lead character is slowly transformed from an idealist out to change the world to the monster he swore he would never become. This transformation happened as lead character engaged in the political process and figured out what was required in order to win. From there he determined that the ends justified the means and he engaged in a winning strategy even though what he was doing was in complete violation of his conscience. As a reward for violating his conscience, the lead character rises to the heights of power, while at the same time, it is clear that the character has lost his soul.

I suspect that Solomon, experienced a similar transformation throughout his life. In the beginning, he was an idealist, determined to rule God's people justly. However, over time, the nature of politics and the webs of alliances that he entered eventually trapped him and left him feeling depressed and without hope.

This is clearly evident in our reading for today. In fact, Solomon says that a still born child would be better off than someone who had to experience the darkness of living in such a twisted world. This is Solomon's way of saying that ignorance is bliss.

For if only, he didn't know the truth about how he came into being. If only he didn't know

about all of the consequences of his leadership decisions. If only he didn't know about all the twisted backrooms deals that had transpired over his reign and their implications. If only he didn't know. But, he did. And it bothered him. And it prevented him from enjoying the good things of life.

Perhaps, we can relate. For in most families, there are some skeletons that are in our closets that we find deeply troubling. And then there are the actions we have taken in life, sometimes with the best of intentions, and sometimes not, that have hurt other people. That is a real downer. And then, there is our dark side, that actively engages with the darkness in the world and ends up creating some real havoc. This is a real challenge. Even for the saints among us. And when we become consciously aware of this dark side that dwells within us, and when we realize the evil that we are capable of inflicting: it is perhaps one of the most disturbing revelations we can be given. Indeed, we likely will find ourselves wishing like Solomon that we were as ignorant about the darkness of life as a still born child.

However, if we find ourselves in a situation, similar to the state that Solomon describes in our Scripture reading today, there is good news. For if we find ourselves deeply disturbed by the awareness of our sins of omission and our sins of commission; if we find ourselves disturbed by the growing awareness of our dark side and the evil we are capable of doing; if we find ourselves disturbed by the awareness of the darkness that exists in the world around us and how it seems impossible to extricate ourselves from this darkness, the Bible tells us that we are on the pathway towards God, we are on the pathway towards salvation. This is good news.

For as we learned in our sermon series on the five sacrifices (reparation, purification, burnt, grain, peace), the first step in our journey towards God is repentance. In the act of repentance we acknowledge our shortcomings, and we also recognize that we are completely unable to fix ourselves or the world that we live in. In the act of repentance we recognize that we are completely dependent on Christ to redeem us and to redeem our world. In the act of repentance we place our trust in Christ that he has redeemed us, that he is purifying us, and that he will fully restore us when he comes again for his church. In the act of repentance, we find the hope of escaping from the darkness that Solomon describes in today's Scripture reading and that is so prevalent in our world today.

With this in mind, may God grant us a spirit of repentance as we acknowledge all the ways we fall short of the glory of God. May God grant us a spirit of repentance as we acknowledge all the ways we are dependent on Christ for our salvation. And may God grant us a spirit of repentance as we place our hope in Christ and through our trust may we experience the joy of the Lord.