Devotional on Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

So here’s a hard truth: there is no such thing as the risk-free life! There is no path we can take, however carefully planned, however wisely and cautiously approached that can protect us from the reality pointed out by the author of Ecclesiastes when he says “no one knows whether love or hate awaits…”

In this series which I’ve called “Keeping it Real,” we’re examining some of the hidden gems of contained within the book of Ecclesiastes, one of the so-called wisdom books in the Hebrew Scriptures, as a whole a lost treasure in our secular age.

Ecclesiastes is the Latin title of the book which is a translation of the Hebrew Qohelet which means Teacher, Preacher or committed, more loosely, committed participant in the spiritual/political life of the community.

Qohelet is the equivalent of a Hebrew philosopher and though we can tell by the type of Hebrew he’s using that he’s writing only a couple of hundred years before Christ, as a literary technique, he’s channeling the wisdom of King Solomon, known in lore as the nation’s wisest King, but also it’s most sensuous and indulgent. Solomon lived around a 1000 years before Christ.

But who better to set up as a foil as we ask questions like “What does it mean to live well in God’s world?” “Is it possible to pursue wealth and pleasure and still be a faithful follower of God?” “And, given the shortness of life and the fact that even the best parts of life seem to elude us like a vapour of smoke passing through the air, what does it mean to embrace the gifts we’ve been given?”

Today’s topic, taken from our reading in chapter 9 is “risk” and the human propensity to think we can avoid it. We desire risk-free investments; we want to know in advance that our relationships will last or that our work with our kids will pay off. We want to know that our exercise routine will “for sure” protect us from illness. We want to imagine that if our motives are good and we apply ourselves that “everything will work out.”

And yet, Ecclesiastes would have us face the truth “As it is with the good man, so with the sinner.” At another place, “…chance happen[s] to them all. Moreover, no one knows when her hour will come.”

There is no ultimate risk-free protection from the folly and madness of many human beings. All of us are paying the price for unhealthy practices foisted upon our world by the greed and the evil that lurks in the hearts of those who have decided they’re not going to “be the stewards of creation” but abuse it. And I’m not trying to blame shift, to some degree, we all make choices or find ourselves in situations where we participate in the structures that simply “are the way things are” at this stage in human development, or “chaos” as you would have it

In the face of that, it’s not prudent or wise to try to avoid risk, but to risk wisely. This is a bit of a continuation of last week’s theme “wise as serpents, innocent as doves,” not as a way “to stay safe,” but as a way to live with godly abandon.

To riff on more of Ecclesiastes as it is found here and elsewhere in the book, life is a mixed bag and so we should seek joy where it might be found: with a partner, in food and drink, in work and learning.

Even while remembering that every day is one foot closer to the end, we can enjoy that we are alive, we can enjoy the challenges before us and the relationships God has privileged us to be alongside.

I’m always struck by how little even the very smartest really know about what’s coming next, in July of 2008 we didn’t know that in two months the entire world would be in the worst recession since the great depression. It was astounding how little the world’s elite economists could predict even though all the data was essentially there.

On December 1st of 2019 nobody knew (unless you believe in conspiracies) that 2020 would be defined by the most severe crisis the world has had to endure since WWII. And although not as severe as a world war by any stretch, it has been shocking how quickly and thoroughly the world has changed.

Indeed it has been calculated that almost 2/3 of all forecasts made by social scientists prove to be mistaken. Who can calculate human ambiguity and nature’s surprises. To qualify, this is not the same as predicting things like climate change which has data points for hundreds of years thanks to the way we can measure CO2 levels in ice etc.

The promise of a risk-averse life is the twin to the false promise of control. We are aware of it and yet we fall prey to its seductions. Our advertising emphasizes that we need not be victims of frailty or mortality. We are taught from our first breath that we define and shape ourselves and become whoever and whatever we want to be. And there is truth in our power to choose and in our will!

We are invited to pursue retirement planning (a good thing); a healthy body, a good thing but are we invited to pursue God and do we have a plan to do so.

If life is risk and if to live well is to risk wisely, how to live? The Lord’s Prayer is my ultimate go to when I need a roadmap. There is so much I can’t know, there is so much that will happen that I can’t plan for so what to do?

“Our Father in heaven….” We have a Father. I’m all about the incomprehensibility of the Divine life and essence, and yet that Divine Life is a Father to us. That gives me confidence! This Father hasn’t promised to protect us from risk but to guide us and be with us in it!

“…hallowed be your name.” Our purpose is to allow that closeness of divinity be treasured, be reverenced in me and through us. If that is not my desire, I’m praying this way so it becomes my desire.

“Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.” Let there be a beautiful twinning of the sublime and the material, God’s way of influencing shaping the way we influence each other: Shalom!

“Give us today our daily bread!” For all my planning, today’s manna is there for us, for me, dare to pick it up and eat it!

“Forgive us our sins/debts as we forgive those who sin against us/our debtors.” The sense here, which is at the heart of this prayer is that God has done this for us; this is our mission. This is what brings Shalom to us and others. If we can’t forgive—and I can hold onto a grudge as well as anyone—then I need your help. Here’s a great reason to confess to a wise friend or spiritual guide. Bitterness is one of the most toxic poisons of life! Do whatever it takes to purge yourself of it!

“Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil” there may not be a risk-free life, but it is absolutely essential that we pray that we don’t fumble into disaster, either self-made or societally made that we don’t have to!

I pray this line in our present circumstances and for the far greater reckoning of climate change that is already upending our world in far greater ways than a virus ever will. Here’s where the original prayer probably ended but we usually pray Matthew’s addition which is fine in it’s own way, “For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.”

The Lord’s prayer is the ultimate path to “keeping it real!” The path to live into the appropriate risk that is simply with us as finite beings and that calls from us risky faith. More than that, it helps us connect with God’s creativity and ingenuity!

This is not an escapist hope but a true hope that despite all the risks and trials of this life, in spite of death that we have *the* reason to be optimistic! I don’t know how many of you remember the Oscar-winning movie *Shakespeare in Love* the fictional story of a love affair that Shakespeare had but that at the same time captures the Christian optimism of his plays.

At various times in the movie characters are moved to proclaim their belief that everything will work out. When asked how this will happen, they reply, “I don’t know, it’s a mystery”.

We don’t know all of the mystery, thus the risk, but we know enough and we have the tool to help us navigate what we don’t know; we’d be foolish not risk wisely and live fully into the time God has given us!