Devotional on Ecclesiastes 11:1-8

I was on a Zoom meeting this past week and just before we prayed someone in the group said, we all sound so sad; and it was true! All of us had expressed what a difficult time this was for our adult children to make their way in the world, all of us were worried for them.

We noted that many of us have lived through “tough times” and so have some kind of internal barometer to manage the stresses of this time. When you’re starting off you don’t have that; though when life becomes a tad more normal, say in a couple of years (yes I know, that’s a long time!) they certainly will have a barometer against which to measure future “tough times.”

Denise and I are reading “The Martian” a novel about a time in the future in which, through a series of very unfortunate events, an astronaut Mark Watney, finds himself stranded on Mars. At one point, things get even worse, he develops a leak in his space suit and he realizes that the oxygen is leaking out so fast he won’t be able to make it back to his air-filled bunker.

This sense of isolation and while at the same time, hope is slowly seeping away, is what many people in our culture—young people for sure, but not just the young—are experiencing right now and it’s really difficult.

What to do? How to live? As we’ve been making our way through the book of Ecclesiastes this summer, in conversation with the good news of Jesus, we’ve been exploring life’s contours, particularly the contours of human experience (life is breath-like, everything slips away from us rather quickly), human desire (for control via hording, greed, power), human coping mechanisms (the pursuit of distractions and pleasure), and human wisdom (learning to live with limits, with thankfulness and generosity with what we have) along with many other things.

The beauty of a book like Ecclesiastes is that it reminds us that all of these realities apply to all of us: Jews, Christians, and all other people. The difference our baptism makes is that we live into all this in the context of forgiving love that empowers us to live from and into that forgiving love!

Now as we near the end of the book, the author, whom we’re calling Qohelet after the Hebrew title of the book wants to reiterate some of what he considers his most important insights.

In last week’s installment I argued that Qohelet wants us to not to fall prey to seeking a risk-free life or a “fools rush in” life but a life in which we “risk wisely.” I said, that for me, living with the Lord’s Prayer as a daily guide has been very helpful for me.

But Qohelet knows our propensity for security and caution; he knows that when we hear “risk wisely” we most likely will translate, “risk very little” and so he throws out an interesting metaphor, “Send out your bread upon the waters, for in the long course of time (our translation has ‘after many days’) you will find it or you will get it back.

Then he explains, “divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.”

Some commentators have tried to say (bizarrely to my mind) that this has to do with making overseas investments. In other words, with almost no knowledge of how ancient economics worked they’ve tried to project modern capitalism back into this book which has time and time again warned against conspicuous accumulation!

The proposal of Rashi, ibn Ezra, one of the greatest Jewish commentators who lived in the medieval period seems the most plausible. In the face of life’s unpredictability and capriciousness, don’t live defensively, live generously. To “risk wisely” then is to “risk generosity.” This puts teeth to our trust. Those who are genuinely trusting God, live generously.

Qohelet isn’t, initially at least, talking about making sacrifices at the temple, what we would call tithes and offerings, as his explanation stresses it’s about living with an open hand in your relationships, in your business life, in your neighbourhood, with those around you.

Of course there is no guarantee of immediate return on investment; but in God, or as we would say, in Christ, no generous action is “wasted” or unimportant. In the course of events, possibly even after a long time, we may end up in need and enjoy the reciprocation of support from someone we have helped or even just spoke an encouraging word to.

Sometimes we give generously of our time and our efforts seem to come to nothing. Recently we had two volunteers at St. Thomas give generously of their time in an attempt to bring a Daycare into our facility, after over a year negotiating the prospective Daycare decided to not come. Were the efforts of our volunteers a failure? No! In some way we don’t yet know, their efforts will lead to something new, to something positive; it’s just not yet clear what that will be.

This because as Qohelet says, we don’t fully know the exquisite working of God who brings life to the fetus and makes everything. It is this God whose infinite creativity and love is the very definition of generosity. When we live generously we ride God’s coattails as it were.

As a flipside, we are urged to pay only a relative amount of attention to the “signs of the times,” in yet another metaphor, “Whoever observes the wind will not sow;
and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.” Of course this is a general principle, Qohelet isn’t talking about ignoring *all* the signs the way some people are ignoring the best health information in our day.

But, to put it bluntly, we need to strongly resist the notion that, say, this current pandemic, is the end of the world; it’s not! Even if we’ve lost our employment, or our routines, or even if we’re isolated.

One of the best ways to gain perspective is to act like a farmer. A good farmer knows that she can’t always wait for the perfect time to plant. To risk wisely is to plant seeds, and not just one but many, and not just when conditions appear optimum!

So the corollary of living generously is living diligently. Not just planting one seed but many, not just trying one thing and if it doesn’t work, giving up, but trying 10 things knowing that eventually their will be a yield to our stubborn diligence.

And if there isn’t because, I get it, there are no guarantees, well then, the work itself is it’s own reward. Our exploring of life and possibilities is it’s own fulfillment. Reach for the stars, and if you fall short you may end up at least on the moon!

My son is a writer and there are literally millions of writers and each of those writers submits stories and screen plays and approximately .01 percent of anything submitted gets published and only a very small percentage of things published make enough money to support the writer. Why do you write, I ask him, because I’m a writer not a fame seeker; I am made to write, and I will write!

This is the diligence and stick-to-itiveness that is pointed to in our gospel parable. The things we hope for come in connection with God, with opening to God, to trusting in God and applying ourselves to God’s Mission of Loving Justice.

I’m not saying that good things don’t happen to and through those who don’t trust God; just that when the darkness comes, when isolation sets in, when it feels like the oxygen is being sucked from your life, it is this basic participation in God’s generosity that will prepare you for what’s next. Amen.