**Keeping It Real!**Pt. III – “
(Summer Book Study on Ecclesiastes During the Covid Pandemic)

Devotional on Ecclesiastes 3:1-22, Psalm 13 and Matthew 13:24-30

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” the famous first words of Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, my vote for best opening lines of a novel, at least novels that I’m aware of.

The rest of the opening paragraph goes, “it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

In his historical novel Dickens is referring to France in the late 1770’s, so just before the French Revolution, but he’s also referring to Britain at the time of his novel, 1859. And by evoking two time periods and by using this rhetorical technique, these “bookend” statements, he’s claiming to notice something universal about human society, about our experience of human society.

When I read it it’s hard not to think of contemporary religious and political expressions and brave souls who soldier on in search of truth and wisdom in the midst of the craziness.

What is less commented on is that Dickens is deliberately reflecting the poetic structure of the first passage we read today which was the topic in our Bible study this week and the topic of this Devotional.

In the first two parts of this series I’ve said that the author of Ecclesiastes who is playing the part of King Solomon, has been urging us to “Keep It Real” in the face of the reality that we try to hide from but that is best not kept in the dark: our lives have ephemeral, breath-like quality to them; we can’t seem to “hold the moment.” Not with money, power or pleasure.

It’s as if we are built to surrender to this and not fight it. And, indeed, we’ve begun to explore how this “surrender” isn’t a giving up but the beginning of a partnership with Divine life.

Now, in the third part of our series, we take a step back asking the question “what *is* the real?” As I was seeking to demonstrate in my Children’s Time, we often confuse “the real” with measuring or marking or observing the real.

What is real is the flow of the universe; instituted, we believe by God. We decide to mark this in different ways, we decide to give experiences names like “a minute” or “my birthday” or “the worst of times.” But these descriptions are simply that and will prove to inadequate explanations of “the flow” just as Zeno’s paradox can’t be an accurate description of time.

To get at this “flow” Solomon resorts to poetry; a wise move because as Zeno has shown us, logic can’t get us there: this is a poetry, like Dickens, that is based on a poetic technique called Merismus, which is a statement of polar extremes as a way of embracing everything that lies between them. When Genesis 1:1 says that God created the heavens and the earth it means and everything in between. You’d be speaking truthfully of an omnivore like myself if you said, “Doerksen will eat anything from soup to nuts.” This is a more subtle merismus playing not on taste or type of food but on texture. If you didn’t know that, see you learned something!

Merismus is what makes our wedding vows so powerful “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health.” We get that it means “in everything life will bring us, I’ll be there with and for you!”

Here, the author seems to be quite deliberate, he chooses 28 items, 14 couplets, both multiples of 7, the biblical number of completion and perfection. This, in other words, is a snapshot of reality writ large in terms of how humans experience “the flow of it.”

And one thing is clear, it’s beyond our control; it’s too big for us to get a handle on. And yet, a second thing is also clear from the poetry, though the large-scale flow and regularity of existence is beyond our ability to master, we can “flow within the Flow” as it were; we have the capacity to plant things, cultivate things, build things and destroy things.”

And there’s a third thing; though Solomon is mostly describing in his poetry, that is, he’s not trying to say we should only experience the more positive part of each couplet, clearly he believes that’s not possible, just as we’re born, surely we will die;

but there is a discernable movement towards the most important human capacities: on an individual level, hate and love; on a societal level, war and peace.

I think it was this final couplet “war and peace” that influenced Pete Seeger’s famous anti-Vietnam war song Turn, Turn, Turn made even more famous by *The Byrds* in 1965. Almost all the lyrics except the refrain are taken from these verses.

Seeger took the final word “peace” as the poem’s destination though that is an interpretation for sure. In other words all things have their place, but now, and ultimately, it’s the time for Peace!

But I think that is precisely the subtlety and beauty of Ecclesiastes and, I think, of the Gospel parable that Jesus tells. It is both descriptive and subtly prescriptive. Each time “is what is” and each time presents opportunities for growth and change. Before we “turn” we need to live aware with an acceptance of the Flow of things.

We therefore may want to practice care in our labelling and in our judgements despite the political rhetoric we hear from politicians who promise us a “better future,” relative to what we wonder” or somehow promise to take us back to a time when our nation was “great.” “Great for whom” we might wonder; great for aboriginal peoples, for people of colour, for women, for children, for the differently abled, for LGTBQ people?

We live in the flow of reality which we mark by different descriptions of time, “I grew up in the Great Depression” we say, or “America was great during the time of Ronald Reagan.”

But our judgements run hollow when we realize that the so-called “Great Depression” was also a time of great artistic flourishing, a time of great literature, a time of great public works projects, a time when, the very crisis helped us come together as a society in a way we hadn’t previously.

And we might, in retrospect come to understand that America in the time of Ronald Reagan wasn’t all confidence and strength, that it was also an era of deregulation; it planted the seeds of so many crises we have faced in the last 25 years.

Of course we think of our own time. I said to someone on the day after Donald Trump’s election to the presidency, “this might be the very best thing for democracy.” I’m not sure I was right but certainly there appears to be some shift towards a realization that what we can’t simply take for granted what we presently enjoy.

Our judgements of “best time and worst time” can stop us from recognizing that in this moment it is God’s time!

Okay that’s a nice rhetorical line, but what does it mean? It means as our parable puts it that the Kingdom of God is alive and working even when we’re aware that’s there’s a lot of weeds in amongst the wheat!

It means that no generation is fundamentally greater than another. I don’t believe, in light of God, in a so-called “great generation” or “generation screwed” as some millennials and gen-Z people have said. God is acting in all generations though possibly in different ways.

That’s the descriptive part. The prescriptive part is to ask, how, right now, this time is amenable to Peace, to Shalom, to the loving justice that is God’s will for all peoples and all societies.

Indeed each age, in light of God, is “beautiful in its time.”

Each time is also “salvation time,” a time when God is working for the good of the world and for us if we will but acknowledge that and put our trust in God. This is the NT version of the fear of the Lord mentioned in our Ecclesiastes passage.

This is the appropriate “seizing of the day” to which our passage points. When we genuinely put our trust in God—not just words on paper as it were, but worshipful submission—we are newly empowered to not fear that we are missing out.

We become more inclined to let things mature before we simply “react.” This is part of what Jesus is getting at, let things grow up side by side and see what bears fruit, wheat and what doesn’t.

This certainly has given me the courage to live through the ups and downs of marriage, of parish life, the inevitable ups and downs of everything, really; and that, in turn, is a call to my heart to be faithful in my love knowing that God’s steadfast love towards me and the world is what “The Flow” and “my flow within the Flow” really means!

We are free, not simply to orient our lives to our own death (hold up sheet) but towards God’s Kingdom, towards the true Peace (demonstrate on the sheet).

For from one person God made every nation of people, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and God determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that all people would seek the Divine Life and perhaps reach out for that Life and Find God, though God is not far from each one of us – Paul on the Areopagus.