

**Sermon – "A Reverence That Comes With Questions"**  
**Ecclesiastes 1:2-4, 8-11 2:24-3:13 9:7-10**

Since the Bible affirms that true wisdom is fear of the Lord, it is important to know what that fear really means. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in a book *When All You Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, zeroes in on that meaning. He writes, "Fear of God does not mean being afraid of God, but awe and reverence. Fear is a negative emotion. It is constricting. It makes us want to run away from whatever we are afraid of, or else to destroy it. It makes us feel angry and resentful, angry at that person or thing that frightens us, and angry at our weakness that leaves us vulnerable. To obey God out of fear is to serve God sullenly and with only part of ourselves.

But awe is different. Like fear, we feel a sense of being overwhelmed by confronting someone or something much more powerful than ourselves. But awe is a positive feeling, an expansive feeling. Where fear makes us want to run away, awe makes us want to draw closer, even as we hesitate to get too close. Instead of resenting our own smallness or weakness, we stand open mouthed in appreciation of something greater than ourselves. To stand at the edge of a steep cliff and look down is to experience fear. To stand securely on a mountain and look around is to feel awe. We could linger there forever."

We have all had moments of awe and reverence. Most every day I take a 30 or 40 minute walk, over pretty much the same route, on several streets, soccer fields, a fine graveled track, and by woods with a small pond. Many times I have had to stop in awe and reverence, like seeing an osprey building a nest out of sticks at the top of a soccer field light, or hearing the spring peepers and frogs sing a song that shivers the soul, or glimpsing two little birds sitting a fence, not just close, but shoulder touching shoulder, evidently in deep companionship. On such walks, I feel reverence, sensing that this feeling lies at the heart of most everything. And with this reverence, comes deep questions about life in general and what it all means.

No book in the Bible frames the deep questions of life more profoundly than the Book of Ecclesiastes. Some have termed it the most dangerous book in the Bible for its searing honesty in going beyond the illusions and superficialities of everyday existence, beyond it to reverence at the core of everything. The writer of

the book is known in Hebrew as Qoheleth, and in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew, as Ecclesiastes. It is from the Greek that English Bibles get the title Ecclesiastes. The word "Ecclesiastes" means "someone who addresses the assembly as a lecturer or a philosopher or a speaker."

The speaker of Ecclesiastes is most probably not King Solomon, as some commonly think. Solomon is tied to the book because he was considered the founder of the Jewish wisdom tradition. Many books and writings were connected to him in dedication, like authors do today in prefaces to books. Some of the words, happenings, and sayings might be traced to Solomon, but language, ideas, and references to rulers before Solomon, speak to a much later time for the Book of Ecclesiastes.

The author was apparently a well-to-do, older Jew, who in the spirit of Solomon, dares to ask the crucial questions of life around 250 BCE, some 750 years after Solomon. The questions he asks are bold ones. Why does life seem to go in circles, out of our control, the same thing over and over? Why is it that all the pleasures in the world won't ultimately satisfy us? Why is it that the more we know, the more worries and problems we seem to have? Why is it that though we busy ourselves with hard work, we eventually lose everything to others in accidents, bad deals, ill health, old age, and death? Why is life so unjust, with bad things happening to good people and good things happening to so-called bad people?

Ecclesiastes would have understood early 20<sup>th</sup> century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who once wrote, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some day into the answers."

Ecclesiastes' questions were prompted by what was going on in the lives of the people in his day, lives that seemingly lacked awe and reverence. He probably wrote at a time when the Jews were living in a peaceful culture of moderate prosperity. There was little conflict or vigor in the average person's status quo life, and the white water of genuine faith was beginning to collect in pools of stagnate water. So called wise people were everywhere, and were trying to give insights on

how to handle the everyday routines of life, work, sex, pleasure, leisure, family, and community.

Many of the so-called wisdom teachers were losing touch with reverence, reverence that flowed out of scriptures that revealed the law given by God to Moses. Moses was the man who took off his shoes in the presence of a burning bush. The popular teachers of wisdom in Ecclesiastes' day seemed shallowly separated from God and the revealed law, and the common people seemed to want insights, but little of the divine. They seemed to want bits and pieces of revelation, offered in a superficial, watered-down style, bits and pieces that would help them get things and succeed in life.

The common faith of the people began to take two distorted forms. One form was an over-confident faith, based mostly on assumed insights. Worship became superficial, subjective, a seeking after sensationalism, something supplemented with entertaining music, dance, and even sexual activity, something devoid of reverence. The focus was on getting one's own needs met and forgetting that worship was to be a response to God's life-giving ways, within a community of faith. The people failed to see that worship was not only something to be received, but also something that would lead to an offering up in service and action. Worship was not merely to be personally gratifying, for at its heart there was to be change, and the willingness to reverence God in all we are and we do. The parallels to our day are eerie. We talk about having a worship experience or complain we didn't get anything out of a worship experience. We forget things like confession, commitment, loyalty, action, service, all flowing out of awe and reverence.

The other form of faith distortion in Ecclesiastes' day was a nervous other-worldliness. Some people sensed the superficiality of things, and placed their hope in another world. People began to focus on angels, demons, an afterlife with heaven and hell. Again, the parallels to our day are eerie, for today there is deluge of books and blogs on angels, heaven, past life regression, and other off-beat stuff.

A modern interpreter Diogenes Allen summarizes the two distortions like this. "For many, religion both the bizarre and the ordinary Christian variety, is a means to succeed in business, gaining or preserving health, protection against harm, and

attaining a never-ending existence. I used to think my task as a philosopher and clergyman was to keep the possibility of God at least open - - as though the struggle was between religion or no religion. I now have become aware that a more pressing problem is not a shortage of religion, but far too much bad religion."

What then is Ecclesiastes' prescription or answer to the dilemma of shallow living due to superficial religion? On the surface he seems to be cynical, pessimistic, saying that everything is like a breath exhaled into the air, and that at the core of most lives is uselessness, vanity, sheer futility, meaninglessness, vexation, falseness, illusion, emptiness, or as one irreverent translator put it, "flatulence." The Hebrew word behind uselessness appears 40 times in the book. The emphasis on uselessness is Ecclesiastes' way of trying to shatter the shallowness of life and religion in his time.

But amid the shattering is his prescription for the problem, a prescription which can be stated simply amid the questions no one else was asking. "Enjoy life out of reverence for God." He repeats this over and over in the book. "The best thing we can do is eat drink and enjoy what we earn. Yet even this comes from God. (2:24) All of us should eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for. It is God's gift. (3:12) The best thing is to enjoy what we have worked for. (3:22) The best thing is to eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for during the short life God has given (5:18) I am convinced we should enjoy ourselves. We can at least do this as we labor during the life God has given us in this world." (8:15)

"Go ahead - - eat your food and be happy; drink your wine and be cheerful. It's all right with God. Always look happy and cheerful. Enjoy life with one you love. (9:7) It is good to be able to enjoy the pleasant light of day. (11:7) Young people, enjoy your youth."(11:9)

We must be careful here about what it means to enjoy. Ecclesiastes doesn't mean we are to party all the time, to eat, drink, and be merry. We assume that to enjoy is to have more and more things to enjoy. But if we don't have time or health or the inner capacity to enjoy things, these things are futile. As someone wisely put it, "Greater than more things to enjoy is the capacity to enjoy what we already or still have." And the things offering the greatest enjoyment are almost always things without big price tags, things available to all, things that produce

reverence - - things like breath, life, health, healing, nature, friendship, love. As the Jerusalem Talmud put it, "Every one must render an account before God of all the good things he or she beheld, and did not enjoy."

To enjoy is to say "yes" to life with a deep sense of gratitude and reverence for God. This "yes" is what ancient people of the Bible meant by the word "amen." The Apostle Paul put it like this in II Corinthians 1:20, "As surely as God speaks the truth, my promise to you was not a 'Yes' or 'No,' for it is he who is the 'Yes' to all of God's promises. This is why through Jesus Christ our 'Amen' is said to the glory of God."

To enjoy, to say "yes," to say "amen" doesn't mean everything in life will always be ok, or that everything will turn out right, or that there will be no struggle, suffering, or pain. It means that through all the mystery and the soul baring questions, many unanswerable, we are still able to say "yes" to God and the basic gift of life. And to wonder at it all, that we live with breath, beating hearts, flowing blood, bodies, senses, minds, feelings, thoughts, connection to others, in families and faith communities, on a big earth, that is only like a speck of dirt in an unfathomably huge universe.

I remember more than 50 years ago at college, being shown a film called *The Powers of Ten*. It started with the arm of a picnicking man laying on grass in Chicago, and expanded out the power of 10, over and over until the farthest expanse of the known universe was reached.

Then it reversed speedily, and retracted to the power of 10, over and over again, arriving back at the man's hand, before going down into cells and into the smallest particles or energy waves known. It blew my mind, as has a more recent IMAX film that does the same thing perhaps better, a film called *Cosmic Voyage*, narrated by Morgan Freeman. Every now and then I pull out this film to watch it when I feel too big for my britches, and need a shot of humbled reverence for the privilege of just living in such a universe.

Ecclesiastes' questioning enjoyment is not necessarily happiness, for happiness depends on the outer happenings about us. Such enjoyment comes from the inner heart filled with reverence for God in all that is. We are usually not able to express this feeling of enjoyment, or make it happen, or make it endure, but

somehow we know there is something beyond and within us, a mystery to be revered and questioned.

Wise teachers have called this feeling by various names. German philosopher Rudolph Otto, called it the “numinous idea of the holy.” Polish American rabbi Abraham Heschel called it “radical amazement,” concluding that “just to be is holy.” Austrian Israeli philosopher Martin Buber called it the “I-Thou or I-You” connection, beyond any I-It connection. American psychologist Abraham Maslow called it a “peak experience.” Romanian religious historian Mircea Eliade ( mu see uh lee aa dee) called it the “luminous golden world.” German theologian, humanitarian, and doctor to the poor in an African jungle, Albert Schweitzer, called it “reverence for life,” once saying, “As soon as we do not take our existence for granted, but behold it as something unfathomably mysterious, thought begins. And as soon as we acquire knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious. The soul is the sense of something higher than ourselves, something that stirs in us thought, hopes, and aspiration which go out to the world in goodness, truth, and beauty.”

A woman named Florence Williams, in a recent book entitled *Heartbreak: A Personal and Scientific Journey*, called this questioning reverence simply awe, In the book she relates her experience of a 25 year marriage ending, her loss of health, weight, sleep, and the lonely grief from deep personal and social pain.

But there was one thing beyond therapy, lab tests, prescribed drugs, research, conversations with other, one thing that seemed to turn her life around. That thing was awe, a questioning reverence that she experienced in nature, hiking on mountains, and canoeing on a river in solitude. She, and all of these wisdom teachers, point to a revered enjoyment that can come, even amid life’s unanswerable questions.

It is intriguing that the Book of Ecclesiastes is still assigned reading for the most joyful of all the Jewish festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast celebrates the bounty of the fall harvest and God's Exodus preservation of the ancient Jews in the wilderness. Reading the most negative book at the most joyful of holidays, was a way of reminding the Jews that God's blessings can only be enjoyed if the shallowness and superficiality of life and religion are relinquished through courageous questioning.

Only when we learn that such a shallow life is useless, can we go on to true enjoyment, saying "yes" to life, having reverence for God. This enjoyment, this amen, this saying "yes" is the heart of all true wisdom, and what the Bible calls faith. When we learn to truly say this "yes," then we can begin to see answers to some of Ecclesiastes great questions. Why does life seem to go in circles and remain out of our control? Because people of genuine faith know it doesn't. They know God is working all the time to heal and redeem everything in love. There is a time for everything. And we can be grateful. Why don't all the pleasures in the world satisfy? Because people of faith know that only reverence for God gives true enjoyment. Why is it that the more we know, the more problems we seem to have? Because people of faith know that knowledge can lead us away from God into shallow self-sufficiency. Knowledge is to lead us toward God if it is to be true wisdom. Why is that we busy ourselves with hard work, only to lose it all eventually? Because people of faith know that merely grasping for more and more is not the heart of true enjoyment. True enjoyment grows out of awe doing something well unto God. Why is life so unjust and hard with its suffering, old age, and death? Because people of faith know that it is the struggle itself that lures us toward God, toward reverence, toward the "yes" of heartfelt enjoyment.

Ecclesiastes sums it up well in 12:13. "After all this, there is only one thing to say, "Have reverence for God, and obey the divine commands, because this is all that we were created for, whatever the questions."