

What Time Is It?
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
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Introduction

Why do we read Ecclesiastes on New Year's Day? Dr. Roberta Goodman remembers a time three years ago, when she took part in the Union for Reform Judaism summer art camp. The camp served Junior High and Senior High School students.

As the rabbi, she supported the counselors and campers, helped out with services, tutored and assisted with the camp's study theme. She was surprised to learn that the study topic for the summer was Kohelet, or in English, the Book of Ecclesiastes. Her first thought was: "It's so dark! This is summer camp where [students] are supposed to have fun! What are they going to get out of the ramblings of an older person reviewing and [moaning] about life?"¹

Three summers later, Rabbi Goodman wrote that the staff and even the young campers are still talking about the session. The mere mention of the word 'Kohelet' brings words of gratitude for something deep, yet you could reach it, uplifting, yet distressing, memorable and powerful.

Kohelet and Sukkot

The whole scroll of Kohelet (the Book of Ecclesiastes) is read during Festival Sukkot, in English this is called "the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles)".

The opening of the scroll introduces the person, Kohelet, as the 'son of David, king of Jerusalem'. It suggests that these words come from King Solomon, but most scholars doubt this. Either way, the words of Kohelet are like those of an elder looking back at the end of his life, while taking account of the good and bad, and coming to some conclusion, or resolution, about the contrasts in life. Coming to accept that the good, the bad, and the ugly are all part of life.²

Dr. Goodman asks, "So why would teenagers like Kohelet?" The rabbi reminds us that our American culture is filled with optimism. For example, why is the movie and song, "Singing in the Rain" such a classic? I remember the movie with a smiling Gene Kelly singing and dancing through a downpour. We love his optimism!

¹ Dr. Roberta Louis Goodman, "To Everything There Is a Season: Turn, Turn, Turn to Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) this Sukkot", posted September 16, 2013, available at: www.osrui.org.

² Ibid.

But Kohelet gives us life as it is with all its tensions, and holds them together—the unpleasant, grief, folly, and even the futility often of our own making. We try to control life, while knowing that control is an illusion. Kohelet writes that “All is vanity”. A better translation might be that all of our striving is as vapor or mist. Chasing after success is like chasing the wind. “We are given possibilities that are greater than we are”, writes Dr. Goodman, “in this way, Kohelet is a soulmate for teenagers, he is sympathetic to them”. He gives young people advice at the end of the book.

Teenagers are at an amazing stage in life with one foot in childhood and one foot in adulthood. It is a time of character formation and making decisions about who they want to be. At this stage in life, they are trying things on as they build an identity. One question that we ask of our confirmands is, ‘Who am I?’... ‘Do I want to follow Christ, or choose another path?’

At this stage teenagers, also experience sadness and loss. They may deal with family chaos, break-ups, bullying, and other bumps in the road of life. For someone going through hard times, Kohelet sounds real. Reality can be harsh. In an interview, Eli Wiesel once remarked that as a teenager he knew that he would write about his experience and witness of concentration camps and share his message with the world. Preacher, William Sloan Coffin, said, “I’m not always optimistic, but I am always hopeful.” Our Scriptures testify to a God who is with us and for us, in all our varied circumstances.

Kohelet also encourages readers to enjoy life because God wants us to enjoy life, and life is also to be enjoyed, but Kohelet doesn’t pretend that all life is good. Kohelet shares what he has experienced and witnessed; and still, the elder writer encourages young people to follow God and keep God’s instructions.

“The Book of Ecclesiastes holds the tension between life’s conflicts, with despair and darkness on the one hand, and a sense of fulfillment and joy on the other hand. These contrasts are a part of life---there are many sobering moments and there are many uplifting moments”.³ In this final week of the year, did you notice how the newspapers, television, and other media tried to capture memorable events of 2016?

Why do we read Ecclesiastes on New Year’s Day?

Like the elder Kohelet, at year’s end we tend to look back and review, as we look ahead to next year. This is often a time to make decisions, or ‘resolutions’. Have you noticed

³ Ibid, Goodman.

that New Year's resolutions often sound the same: I will lose 20 pounds, I will quit smoking (or some other habit)? Might New Year's invite us to something deeper in our faith? What might God be calling you to do in the coming year?

From Ecclesiastes 3:1 we read: "There is a time for every matter under heaven". What time is it for you? Please turn to the printed list of words [in your bulletin or see below]. As you reflect on the question, I invite you review the list of words from Ecclesiastes 3:1-13. Select the word that best reflects a resolution that you have for the year.

Birthing
Harvesting
Breaking down
Laughing
Throwing away
Refraining
Keeping
Speaking out
Dying
Ending
Building up
Mourning
Gathering
Seeking
Throwing away
Loving
Planting
Healing
Weeping Dancing
Losing
Keeping silence
Peace making ⁴

"What needs to happen in order for the time you hoped for to be fulfilled?
What changes do you need to make?
What new things need to be embraced?
Of what do you need to let go?"

⁴ Printed words and questions from Ecclesiastes from Liturgy for a New Year: A Service of Holy Communion, Dec. 31, 2015/Jan. 1, 2016 New Year's Celebration. Available from 'Worship Ways', www.ucc.org.

Celebration

In the Jewish faith, they read the whole scroll of Ecclesiastes during Sukkot, the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles. A tabernacle is a holy place to dwell. It is to remind Jews spiritually that they are people on the move--they are transient. Their ancestors (and our spiritual ancestors) wandered in the desert for 40 years, building temporary shelters as they traveled and followed God's instruction.⁵

We are pilgrims on a journey of faith. Christians are enjoying a season of rejoicing-- Christ is born! In the Midwest, we are also enduring the darkest part of winter as we reflect on the year past, and make decisions about who we want to be in the New Year.

As we look back, we understand that life is fragile, and only God is eternal. What time is it for you? Is it time to birth something new in 2017? Is it time to heal, embrace, throw away, be more loving. What time is it?

As we reflect on this question, may we listen to God's call, and make a spiritual resolution to be more like Christ in the year ahead. What time is it?

Let us pray:

*Helper in our Past and Hope for our Future,
hold our good intentions, free us from that which keeps us from the good,
and enable us to move into the coming year. Amen⁶*

⁵ Rabbi Mark S. Golub, For the Festival Sukkot (Festival of Booths), an explanation of the significance and the symbols of the holiday, Judaism 101, published on Sep 25, 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FFXY4FxWjs>

⁶ Ibid, Worship Ways.