

## A service of worship for Cashmere Presbyterian – Rev Hamish Galloway Sunday 10 May 2020 - Mother's Day!

### Call to worship

*Teach us to number our days,  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)*

### Prayer of praise

Creator God, you are the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. You are Eternal, all knowing and ever present. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who broke into our human existence with redeeming compassion and mercy. In the person of the Holy Spirit you are our Counsellor, seeking always to lead us into fullness of life. You are our Comforter in sorrow, pain, or distress.

With wholeness of heart we praise you, God.

And God we are thankful. We thank you for the gift of life, for gift of family, the gift of time, the gift of a good food and drink shared with friend, the gift of walking tracks through parkland and over hillsides. And on this Mother's Day, we remember and honour our own mothers, and the special place mothering has in our families and communities – for this we are thankful. Forgive us when we ever take these things for granted!

And we are thankful that we live in a country where good leadership and a united resolve has kept us relatively safe from pandemic.

We pray for countries where this is not the case. Places where thousands suffer death and grief, where front line workers are in constant danger and where poor leadership deepens crisis. Be present in these places to console and to guide, to save and to redeem we pray.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen

### Psalm 90

Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
throughout all generations.

<sup>2</sup> Before the mountains were born  
or you brought forth the whole world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

<sup>3</sup> You turn people back to dust,  
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

<sup>4</sup> A thousand years in your sight  
are like a day that has just gone by,  
or like a watch in the night.

<sup>5</sup> Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—  
they are like the new grass of the morning:

<sup>6</sup> In the morning it springs up new,  
but by evening it is dry and withered.

### The Hymn

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;  
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but nought changeth Thee.

Great Father of Glory, pure Father of Light  
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;  
All laud we would render, O help us to see:  
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee.

### **The word**

This is part 2 of a 3-part series from the wisdom books of the Bible. Last week we looked at the book of Job, today it is the book of Ecclesiastes. We will examine the well-known passage from Ecclesiastes 3 on time:

### **Reading:** A time for everything

There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under the heavens:  
2 a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
3 a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,  
6 a time to search and a time to give up,  
a time to keep and a time to throw away,  
7 a time to tear and a time to mend,  
a time to be silent and a time to speak,  
8 a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace.

<sup>9</sup>What do workers gain from their toil? <sup>10</sup>I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. <sup>11</sup>He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. <sup>12</sup>I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. <sup>13</sup>That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

### **Sermon**

As I read in preparation for this sermon, I came across an image that really helps me understand the levels of meaning in this passage. It comes from a reflection by Lora Copley from the Calvin Theological Seminary in the US. The metaphor she uses is a maze. And Copley invites the reader to imagine the maze from 3 angles: from the outside, from the inside and then from the sky above. I found this helpful and have adopted it today for the structure of this sermon.

## 1. From the outside

Imagine approaching a well-maintained maze, the hedges beautifully trimmed and the whole effect is of something nice, well planned, symmetrical and attractive to look at. It is something that invites us in.

On the surface, at first glance this Ecclesiastes passage is like this. It makes a good poster to put on the wall. It is the basis of a catchy song released by The Byrds in 1965 and then released by the Seekers some time later.

*'To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn'*

And indeed, this passage is a beautiful piece of writing! It has some interesting features. For example, it is made up of 7 couplets. In Hebrew thinking 7 represents completeness. So it is that this poem has a sense of completeness or wholeness to it. A time to be born and a time to die encompasses the whole of a life on earth and so communicates the idea of all of life captured in time.

There is also a sense of completeness in the way the poem embraces two ideas of time. The Greek language has 2 words of time. Chronos contains the idea of the linear passing of time, the relentless tick tock of the clock. Kairos captures the seasonal nature of time, the idea of opportune time. I understand that, when the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures took place the translators had a problem with this passage because they felt they had to choose chronos or kairos. They chose kairos, but in doing so they diminished the full impact of the meaning of this passage, for indeed both ideas are very present in the text. It is about the passing of time and it is about the idea of opportune time, the right season.

So from the outside looking in we have here a beautiful picture painted. This text is poetic, complete, encompassing all of life from a dual perspective of time. This is nice, but it is a superficial view. There is much more to see. And the perspective changes when we take a look from inside the maze.

## 2. Inside the maze

Have you ever been lost in the middle of a maze? I have. How does that feel? I felt trapped.

And this is an idea that comes through strongly in the text. It is there in verses 9-10

<sup>9</sup> *What do workers gain from their toil?*

<sup>10</sup> *I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.*

There is a sense of protest in this that comes out repeatedly in the book of Ecclesiastes. It is there in the very first passage summed up in 1: 8-9

*All things are wearisome,  
more than one can say.  
The eye never has enough of seeing,  
nor the ear its fill of hearing.  
What has been will be again,  
what has been done will be done again;  
there is nothing new under the sun.*

A key phrase here is 'under the sun'. It is repeated 20 times in the book. It is meant to depict a closed system from which there is no escape; earth below, sky above and we are trapped to live out our existence between these two constraints. The idea is that life is confined. The writer is protesting because he feels trapped like one of those hamsters in a wheel; turn, turn, turn. There is an element to living out our life that can be repetitive and boring!

I play golf at Hagley golf course on my day off. And in December last year I was sitting on the deck after our game with my friends and along the path came a bunch of year 13 girls from Girls High. School was out! And I mean that for them it was truly out. It was the last day of school for them, forever. They danced along the path with a sense of release and freedom from the 13 year repetitive cycle of school life. I know that so well. I not only went to school for 13 years, I then worked in the school system for 21 years. Towards the end of that time I was getting very bored with the repetition of the cycle of the school year and it was a relief to get out!

Did you see in the news recently, in the early days of the lockdown, someone climbed the big clock on the hill above Alexandra and swung from the hour hand. The clock could not take his weight and stopped some time between 8.30 and 8.35. That is quite an interesting image. The clock towers over the town, in much the same way as the relentless tick tocking of time towers over our lives as an inescapable reality of life. And there are times when we might want to stop the clock, just like that vandal in Alex did. Yet while he stopped one contraption that measured time, time itself marched relentless on!

So we are trapped in this system of time. But wait, there is more to this. The system is not just relentless, it is also broken. We could see ourselves trapped in a broken closed system. Let me explain ...

The passage talks about the seasons, for example the season for love and the season for hate. And there is a time to hate. It relates to the importance of hating the sinful actions of humanity that cause so much pain. But hate can certainly also appear out of time. It is good to hate the sin, it is not ok to hate the sinner. To hate out of season brings brokenness into our world. Likewise, there is a time for war and a time for peace. Christian theologians debated that for centuries and came up with the idea of a 'just war' – a war that is in season. I think the decision of the allied nations to fight the Nazi's was such a war. But the reality is that most wars are out of season! Or take the couplet a time to be born and a time to die. Psalm 90 talks about the human life span as 70-80 years. That is a good and ideal span of life and death at the end of that is timely or in season, but what about untimely deaths? I remember one day early in my ministry when I had 2 funerals on the one day. One was for a 2-year-old who died of cancer and the other a baby who died of cot death. Sometimes people use the Ecclesiastes passage to rationalise this. It was their time, they say. That these young ones had a time in God's economy to be born and a time to die. I would dispute that. I believe theirs was an untimely death. It was out season and a sign of the heart-breaking brokenness of this world.

So, the feeling in the middle of the maze can be one of being trapped, like a hamster on the wheel, turn, turn, turn. And more than that, it can seem like being trapped in a broken wheelhouse at that. Sound depressing? It was depressing for the writer of Ecclesiastes! This sense of being trapped in a broken system is embedded in the book.

So where is the escape? There are 2 answers in the text – both great pieces of wisdom. And it requires us to have a third form of view of the maze – it is the perspective from above. Imagine sending a drone up to get the whole picture.

### **3. The view from above**

There are 2 aspects of this, one is down to earth and the other is heavenly in perspective.

#### **a. Eat, drink and be merry**

This is a repeated refrain in the book. In this passage it goes like this:

*<sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. <sup>13</sup> That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.*

The essence of this is that life is a gift from God, as much as is possible, embrace the good times and enjoy them. It is quite simple. Do good wherever you can. And enjoy the company of others around a table set with good food and drink. The picture I have in my mind is American Thanksgiving. A time when families gather around a table groaning under the weight of a fine turkey meal and take turns at talking about what they are thankful for. Life is not perfect. That is so apparent to us in this time of pandemic. Yet even in times such as these, there is much to be thankful for. We need to embrace and celebrate those things and the gift of life we have on planet earth while we have it.

#### **b. Take an eternal perspective**

The phrase 'life under the sun' appears 20 times in the book of Ecclesiastes to depict this idea of confinement, but the writer also uses the phrase 'life under the heavens' to signify possibility of escape! This carries the idea of eternity. The lovely phrase in verse 11 is a key to understanding this whole passage:

*<sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

We have within us a sense that this confined, repetitive earthly life is not all there is. That there is something more, just beyond our ability to fully understand. And that sense of eternity breaks into the confined system and offers something much more. God has set eternity in the human heart. Despite the rise of atheism in the materialistic western world in recent years, belief in God and the eternal is overwhelming across the planet. 84% of the world's population identifies with a religious belief<sup>1</sup> and I have seen statistics that suggest that over 90% of the world's population have some kind of belief in the divine. It seems to me that is a strong proof for God in itself, a validation of the idea in this text that God has set eternity in the human heart.

CS Lewis puts this idea of awareness of something more to life into words as follows:

*"The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."*

The view of the maze from the drone footage taken high up gives us the whole picture. We are not longer just approaching from ground level, nor stuck in the middle of the maze. We are hovering above and taking it all in. This is God's perspective. Psalm 90 is again informative for us here when it refers to the idea that 1,000 years is like a day to God. And it goes on to compare human life to the grass that grows up in the morning but has withered away by night fall. This is a wonderful comparison of perspectives on time, God's perspective, and ours. A view from our 4 score years and 10 compared to eternity. Our lives are so fleeting. I remember when I had 3 generations alive who were older than me. In fact, I remember as a boy visiting my great grandfather. It seems like just yesterday. It is still fresh in my memory. And yet now, with the death of my father last year I am now the oldest member of our family. Where did that time go? It seems to have gone like the snap of fingers! Yet, God is not trapped in a fleeting earthbound existence. And the uplifting truth of this text is that he breaks into our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>

earthbound existence and places a yearning for eternity in our hearts – a sense that there is something more to life than the here and now.

And finally, the text makes this big claim that God makes everything beautiful in its time. How could that be? How can the tragic death of the child be beautiful in time? Or the horrendous war in Syria? Or the shocking massacre in the Christchurch mosque? Or the COVID 19 pandemic of 2020? And yet there is something in this. In the middle of the ugliness of the mosque shooting, we people of Christchurch witnessed a beautiful outpouring of love towards our Muslim neighbours and a determined and hope filled resolve that hate would not win. And out of the depths of the pandemic lockdown we have made beautiful discoveries of the benefits of slowing down and drawing close to our families and friends for support. I think God does have an ability to take the worst of circumstances and in time rescue them from bitterness and brokenness. In Romans 8 Paul makes the claim that *'we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'* It is a huge claim. And there are so many things that happen that disturb me greatly and I want to debate them with God! But ultimately I also want to trust that God loves us and is working for the restoration of the beautiful in the place of the ugly. As Paul puts it in Colossians 1:

*<sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

### **So, in conclusion 3 things we can apply:**

1. Embrace the gift of life on this earth that God has given each of us. That involves making good choices about how we live and it is about knowing the seasons of our lives and living a life in season.
2. Develop the faith in God that we need to sustain us when untimely circumstances assail us, when we are struck by things that are cruelly out of season.
3. Know the ultimate escape route from a solely time limited earth-bound existence. To use the idea of being trapped in the maze one last time, the gospel message is that we are all universally trapped in this sinful and broken human existence on planet earth. But just as in a maze, there is an escape route. I am told the escape route in a maze comes about when you place your hand on a wall and walk keeping connection with the wall. Eventually you emerge into freedom. In the same way, if we want to escape the consequences of a life bound by sin and under the sun, we need to put our hand in the hand of Jesus Christ, the one came from eternity and who broke into our earthy existence. The one who can lead us out of the bondage of sinful earthbound existence and into the light of eternity.

### **Closing Prayer**

Eternal God, our lifetime comes and goes so quickly. Compared to you our total life spans are like the grass – here today, gone tomorrow. We go back to the dust, yet you never change.

In light of your eternity give us the wisdom to know how best to use the short time we've been given. Forgive us for wasting our lives on things that insult the gift of life you have blessed us with. In this passing and often broken world show us your love, favour, and power so we can make the most of our days.

In Jesus Name.

Amen.