

IT CAME – TO PASS

It is one of the most familiar, most lyrical, and most tantalizingly enigmatic poems in all the Old Testament wisdom literature. Because it sings in blank verse of “happenings,” dialectical and existential, it also has a decidedly contemporary sound.

Koheleth, the un-ecclesiastic teacher, picks up his BC guitar, and begins to sing (Ecc. 3:1-8): “Everything has its season, and there is a proper time for every happening under the sun

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A time to be born and time to die,
A time to kill and a time to heal,
A time to wreck and a time to build,
A time to seek and a time to quit,
A time to tear and a time to sew,
A time to be silent and a time to speak,
A time to love and a time to hate,
A time for war and a time for peace...

“Everything has its season, and there is a proper time for every happening – happening under the sun.”

Like much modern poetry, this piece has many different sounds depending on you hear it. You can hear it as a cathedral chant, tolling the rich and varied providences of God in the many lives of every man.

Or, you can hear it as a freedom dirge, out of some basement discotheque, living out the senseless dialectic of life, over which no one has any control. Or you can hear nothing at all, not even the rhythm, the beat, that beats out happenings like the beat of the blood in the temples, for this far off and far out Koheleth, may just not be for you. And that’s all right too.

But since you and I are here, I’ll tell you at least a few of the things he has said to me – over a lifetime.

First. One thing I hear in these lines is that everyone lives many lives – many, many lives. From his birthing to his dying, the wise one sees human life is rich and varied. Yes, we all live far more than one life in our lifetimes. Our time is not a smoothly flowing stream, running straight in one direction, so calm, so sweet, so sure – so dull. No, our lifetime is not like a steady stream that lulls to sleep. If we are truly alive, our days are more like freshets after a rainstorm, scattering helter-skeltering, a splattering of all sorts of happenings, wildly divergent, all different,

therefore – demanding, therefore – exciting, tears and laughter, sickness and health: sometimes building and sometimes wrecking, now laughing and again weeping, trying and quitting, loving and hating, war and peace. Indeed we don't live one life but a hundred lives in one, each with its own stimulus, each requiring its own reaction. Bored? How could you be in the midst of it all? Only the fool finds his many lives dull. As Thoreau said on leaving Walden: "Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."

So a second thing this poem has always said to me is – the wise must stay alert. We must keep up with the life we are currently living. Life changes too often for too much dreaming and drifting. And at each change we may not only have to face a whole new battery of circumstances with strategy and tactics we're never explored or employed before, but we will have to rearrange to up-date our self-image.

For example, you may have spent the first 20 odd years of life not trusting anyone over 30, and then a traumatic happening happens (the years flash by –and suddenly – you're no longer 20 – you're 40 – or more.) – you yourself become 30, and your self-image needs a bit of re-furbishing: "a time to wreck" give way to a "a time to build." And you better be aware of it. So don't get caught at middle-age acting like a teenager. A sad, sorry plight.

Because life changes so suddenly, an alert sense of timing is important. Parents, for example, who lack a sense of timing are foredoomed. For example, a wise parent is fully aware that from the moment a child is born, what he wishes most is to be independent of you, in order that he can be an adult on his own some day.

Some years ago, I asked a very charming woman – "and how are things with you?" and she replied, "I am trying to make a success of being an old lad. So I keep saying to myself, 'You are not longer a woman with a husband and little children. Why, even your grandchildren are grown now. Those were all good times. But those times are over. Period. You are now a widow, living alone, and the family is scattered and old friends are either dead or gone. Everything has its season. This is a new time for me and it can be a good time, too.'" "In fact," said she, "I like this retirement center. I hope someday, you'll like it as much as I do."

I was a fencer once, and in fencing, as in golf, and any other sport, timing is important. So in the gamesmanship of life, it is equally vital.

On the other hand, some of us have a very poor sense of timing. We waste a great deal of hope and effort and emotion on what simply can not be, or on what has long since gone. Or we fail to catch the tide, we are not alert. As Koheleth said, "There is a time for everything. Sadly – some of us just never catch on to what time it is.

Some never know when opportunity is knocking. We just knock along, with our motor needing a tune-up, a tuning no one else can give us.

Put more rhetorically: "There is a tide in the affairs of men,/ which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;/ (but) omitted, all the voyage of their life/ is bound in shallows and in miseries (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act 4)

But, not only does this Old Testament piece say to us that life is not a stream but a splattering of happenings, to which we better be alert to the changing years with their different demands and challenges and advantages, but it also says to us a word of encouragement from God. It is that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." It is encouraging to know that change is not always a loss. Far from it. Often quite the opposite. It is more often a loss to demand that things never change.

I once met an old man who lived a long, contented life, in spite of many losses. When asked, "How have you managed?" He replied he had a favorite scripture quotation that had sustained him through every change. And the passage was this: "It came to pass." He would say it over and over to himself – "It came to pass." Whatever it was, tears or laughter, joy or sorrow – "it came, sure, it came, but only to pass, to pass away." Nothing, nothing in this world, lasts, not forever. And you wouldn't really want it to. Why? Because as William Blake said: "He who binds to himself a joy/Doth the winged life destroy/But he who kisses a joy as it flies/Lives in eternity's sunrise."

What this quotation has long said to me is that if you want to destroy your happiness, "the winged life," then clutch at the past people, and possessions, youth, beauty, and even God as though you thought they were all going to get away. Hold on to them tight in your hot grasp, as though you were hanging on for dear life, but do that and you'll lose it all. As for the people, your hungry possessiveness will lose you their love. As for the possessions, "moth and rust will corrupt," said Jesus, "and thieves will break through and steal."

Only he who “kisses a joy as it flies lives in eternity’s sunrise,” with much to remember that was sweet and good, but gone and much to hope for that is yet to come. So don’t just look back, look forward – for “joy cometh in the morning.”

It is Christ’s great truth: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall preserve it.” It was what St. Francis of Assisi meant by, “Above all the grace and the gifts that Christ gives to his beloved, is that of overcoming fear.” Eternity is in the forward look.

Our natural tendency is to cling, to demand, to hold on to. You will be much happier if you learn when to let go, how to say good-bye with grace, to wave and smile and never for a moment fear that you will be forgotten. Do this and you will never be in the pitiable, the neurotic, state of feeling neglected, by your family, your friends, or by God Himself. You will not feel sorry for yourself and pout. You will have learned to appreciate who you have and what you have while they are there, and when the wind changes, and they are gone, you will not despair. (As the Psalmist said, “God walketh in the wings of the wind.”) For after all, “Everything has its season.” There is a peace here, and a comfort. For one thing, you will not judge all your life by its lowest moments or by its darkest moods. For all things “come to pass” – i.e., come to you, only to pass away. In all the constant changes of your life – remember before you despair, “joy cometh in the morning.”

In conclusion, there is a strong and deep run of faith through all of this for Koheleth, the teacher. He does not profess to understand the whole mystery of life. Indeed, he calls life an “enigma, so that man can not discover what it is that God has been doing, from beginning to end.” (11b) And yet, and yet, and yet, he has a sense as he puts it, “that God makes each event right for its time.”

It is as though in this ever-changing life, there is a presence and a providence and a plan and that time after time (that in every time of life) in happening after happening, a person meets his appointment, his destiny, as though all along it were a divine intention. So that when you and I reach “a time to die,” we will look back gratefully, and believe what is beyond human belief: that most assuredly in our many lives, everything has, indeed, had its season, and there has been a proper time for every happening that has ever happened to us under the sun and even when death comes – “there will be joy in the morning.”

Let us pray:

O Lord Christ, we too believe that “all things do indeed work together for good, to them that love thee, to them who are the called according to thy purpose.” So let us, O our Lord, all the days of our changeful lives live “in eternity’s sunrise.” In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen