Ecclesiastes has some things to say about COVID-19

The ancient wisdom text urges us to find joy in the limits of the present moment.

by Brent A. Strawn in the January 13, 2021 issue

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As a biblical scholar, whenever I've been asked in recent days what scripture has to say in our present time of crisis, I have tended to refer people to the treasure trove of the Psalms, those prayers of pain and grief and rage. I also point to the book of Amos, that brutal prophet of doom, which could have been written late last week.

But there's another book of great moment for our present moment, in which we face the interconnected crises of global pandemic, economic disparity, and racial injustice. It's the odd little book of Ecclesiastes, also known as Qoheleth, the Hebrew title, after its primary speaker.

One rarely hears Ecclesiastes in church these days, though the poem found in 3:1–8 is well known, due in part to "Turn! Turn! Turn!," the Pete Seeger song that became a hit for the Byrds. The poem is a set of 14 opposed pairs of seasons: a time to be

born and a time to die, a time to love and a time to hate, and so forth.

Whatever the merits of the poetic sentiment, most biblical scholars think the real point comes after the poem; some even think the poem is something Qoheleth quoted (or concocted) only to refute. What is Qoheleth's own take? That even if there is a "season for everything and a time for every matter under the sun," humans do not and cannot know what those times are. We have no control over the times. They just happen—and they happen to us. And that, Qoheleth says, is exactly how God wants it (see 3:11, 14).

If this reading is accurate, the poem is a case of bait and switch: Qoheleth draws us in with sentiments that seem right or pious or wise, only to turn the tables and rebuff them. He does this repeatedly, prompting one great scholar of Ecclesiastes, Michael Fox, to write pithily, "Qohelet is crabby."

So what would crabby old Qoheleth have to say about COVID-19?

Two aspects of Qoheleth's thought are important to keep in mind as we read Ecclesiastes with fresh eyes in light of our present crises. Both have to do with finitude.

Last summer I reread C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy, the first installment of which, *Out of the Silent Planet*, was published in 1938. In terms of contemporary sci-fi, the novels are certainly dated. But in many ways, Lewis was ahead of his time, showing how damaging humans are when we foolishly attempt to transcend our own finitude. The trilogy repeatedly emphasizes that God doesn't expect anything—individuals, species, entire planets—to go on forever. Everything is, in the end, finite, tenuous, ephemeral—all possible renderings of the Hebrew word *hevel*, usually translated "vanity," a term that Qoheleth is particularly fond of.

Finitude is a real problem for Qoheleth. In brief: he doesn't like it. It irks him that death is the great leveler of people, that it places a great question mark over all good things, especially his own wise living. Despite how shrewd he's been, there's no guarantee that his heirs won't be a bunch of fools, squandering everything that he so carefully and painstakingly acquired (2:18–21). To add insult to injury, at the end of his intelligent, disciplined life, he faces the same reward that any blundering dolt does—the cold hard ground of the grave. "Why then have I been so very wise?" he asks (2:14–17).

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It's a good question. Qoheleth's own conclusion is that the whole situation is grievous, pointless (*hevel* again), and a great evil. The whole shebang leads him to hate his life and his work. He turns and gives his heart up to despair (2:17–20).

Death is one instance of finitude—the largest one, in our own experience. But finitude is bigger than death, and, correspondingly, Qoheleth struggles not only with death but with all sorts of limits—to wisdom, morality, work, joy, and so on. At the very end of Ecclesiastes, in a final poem that, for obvious reasons, has never been made into a Top 40 hit, Qoheleth speaks of the end of everything—not just of individual human lives, but of *all* human life and all life of any kind, full stop (12:1–7). After this rather depressing anticlimax, it comes as no surprise that Qoheleth ends up exactly where he began, repeating the opening motto of the book as his final parting words: "Utter futility! All is futile!"

Qoheleth, it would seem, is crabby to the bitter end. And yet, right after that rather merciless coup de grâce, an epilogue commends his words to posterity and to us. His sermon is most certainly a sober-minded assessment of finitude writ large, but it seems wise for us to give him another listen, especially in light of present circumstances. As Walter Brueggemann notes in *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, a small book he wrote about the pandemic, "any serious crisis is a summons for us to reread the Bible afresh."

When we reread Ecclesiastes in our present moment, we are reminded that the human project is, at the end of the day, decidedly small. Our lives come to an end. We all know that, even though we tend to live in denial. But it's not just human lives, Qoheleth insists; it's the human project broadly conceived. Institutions can think, and maybe even forests too, and these can and have come to an end. What of economies, governments, nations, and states—do these end? Sure, of course, and as a matter of course.

I imagine Qoheleth assessing the latest COVID-19 statistics and repeating what he said long ago: "Time and chance happen to everyone. The race isn't always to the swift or the battle to the strong or bread to the wise or riches to the intelligent. No one can anticipate when disaster will strike. Calamity comes without warning" (9:11–12). And of the racial and economic injustices and disparities that were always present but exposed once more by this cruel pandemic, he would likely say: "I saw

all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them!" (4:1), and: "If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them" (5:8).

To paraphrase more colloquially, I imagine Qoheleth asking us, "Well, what did you expect? That your economy could grow forever? That your business could turn a profit forever? That your country would be on top forever? That you could do what you are doing and the planet could handle it forever? That you could oppress other people *forever*?" Stupefied at our stupidity, he'd likely add, "Give me a break."

But there is something else, something more Qoheleth wants us to know about this finitude that marks human life like the delicate spiderweb on the back porch railing or the rainwater glaze on William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow. It is simply this: there is something precious and extraordinarily beautiful about these temporary glories.

This is the second piece of Qoheleth's thought that speaks to present circumstances. The finality of finitude can, or rather should, cast into sharp relief—the highest definition possible—the exquisite nature of life in all its limitedness.

To return to Lewis, after the death of his beloved wife, Joy Davidman, he came to the conclusion that "the pain I feel now is the happiness I had before. That's the deal." It turns out that these two opposed feelings exist in an inextricable feedback loop: happiness can have sharp edges because it ends; knowing it ends makes happiness that much sweeter.

Ecclesiastes urges us to find joy amid the limits of our present situation.

And so it is that cantankerous Qoheleth commends joy to us—no fewer than seven times (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10; see also 7:14). A few biblical scholars have gone so far as to call him a "preacher of joy." That probably goes a bit too far, but it is nevertheless striking that, as cranky as Qoheleth is about finitude, he too stops to smell the roses.

William Brown cites H. Wheeler Robinson's observation that Ecclesiastes "has the smell of the tomb about it"—in Qoheleth's recognition of the all-encompassing nature of death—but adds that it also "bears the unmistakable scent of fried

chicken," typically served at southern funerals. The funeral and grief are real, but so is the comfort food and the good memories shared at the repast. Brown calls this aspect of Qoheleth's thought "the glory of the ordinary," but it could just as well be called "the glory of the finite"; it is the flipside of finitude in all its finality. This sense of glory has resonated with me during the pandemic, especially during quarantine.

As I worried about the future, often catatonic in the face of work decisions that simply had to be made, it suddenly dawned on me that, for the first time in many years, I had all three of my kids home, gathered every night around the dinner table and then the TV, looking for a binge-worthy distraction that could bring some measure of entertainment. The table under the bright kitchen lights, my spouse of 28 years, our children, our high-maintenance puppy, the decent food and drink at hand—all of that is, on the one hand, mundane, ordinary, everyday, and easy to take for granted. On the other hand, it is, upon reexamination, absolutely extraordinary, even glorious.

Don't get me wrong: I frequently longed for the former days, which seemed better than the present, and I wanted a break from 24-hour in-my-grill family intimacy. But as Qoheleth would insist, it's not from wisdom that we long for bygone days. Leave what is past and now irrecoverable to God, who looks after such things (see 3:15).

Finitude, in its most recent but hardly final instantiation as COVID-19, has cast everything into sharp relief under those bright kitchen lights, and I have been—I am—grateful. If we can't determine the time, and it simply happens without our permission, our say, or our ability to comprehend, then all that we can do is receive these seasons and, when possible, enjoy the gifts God has provided: food, companionship, even work (though Qoheleth often describes the latter as gloomy "toil"). I mean, these days, even a steady supply of toilet paper is something to rejoice over.

But surely this aspect of Qoheleth's thought invites critique. It doesn't seem very grand, and it falls woefully short of speaking truth to power. What if our attention to our own set of glorious "ordinaries" turns myopic, blinding us to those who don't have even that much?

A few interpreters have tried to squeeze the book of Ecclesiastes for social justice juice, but the results have been meager. In the first two chapters, Qoheleth is portrayed as the ancient equivalent to the rugged individualist, raised up by his own

bootstraps. He quickly learns that none of his accomplishments matters very much and certainly not ultimately; his self-made success was, again, *hevel*: finite, ephemeral, absurd. But after this point in the book, Qoheleth seems ever more cognizant of the importance of others. He speaks of the two that are better than one (4:9–12), for example, or of one's beloved spouse (9:9). Even so, Qoheleth seems resigned to much of what he sees wrong with the world—maybe too resigned. Perhaps his crabbiness slides into despair, or maybe the book captures him in a particularly pessimistic moment.

Thankfully we don't need Qoheleth—or any single book of the Bible, for that matter—to do the heavy lifting alone. Scripture as a whole clearly asserts that there is no life with God without justice. We have the prophet Amos if we need a call to change our ways regarding the poor, the needy, the justice-deprived. But scripture also asserts, with a little help from Qoheleth, that there is nevertheless more to life with God than justice alone.

If Qoheleth is not especially sanguine about societal change, perhaps that is due to callousness or elitism. Alternatively, and less cynically, perhaps it is the result of his clear-eyed realism about the finitude of the human project—including even our best, most well-meaning justice endeavors. According to Qoheleth, it is not only the oppressed but also the powerful oppressors who have "no one to comfort them" (4:1).

Amos might take issue, but the cranky sage would surely have a few words for the fiery prophet. Attention to mundane gifts that are also beautiful and precious need not preclude caring about others and the egregious, systemic problems plaguing our world in nonviral ways. And maybe Qoheleth and Amos could agree that the glory of the finite includes the very small victories occasionally won in the face of what seem like intractable problems, such that the impossibly long arc of the moral universe really does bend, eventually and ever so slowly, toward justice.

In *What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?* the poet Robert Bly writes a "Warning to the Reader," which describes "panicky blackbirds" trapped in a farm granary. The birds, seeing freedom in "the bands of light" shining in between the wall boards, fly up but fall back, trapped and starving. They can't get out that way; the openings are too slim. "The way out," he writes, "is where the rats enter and leave; but the rat's hole is low to the floor." Bly intends his poetic warning for readers who "love poems of light" too much and thereby end up "as a mound of feathers and a skull on the open

boardwood floor.”

That, to me, sounds like what Qoheleth might say if he met up with COVID-19. The way out of finitude is not by denying or escaping it. It’s by accepting it, and by doing and enjoying—don’t forget the enjoying!—what we can, while we can, within our profoundly inescapable and frustrating limitations. The rat’s hole isn’t a barn razing, burning everything down; neither is it a new barn raising, making all things new. The rat’s hole is dark and close to the ground. But it can be a mode of surviving, maybe even a way of thriving, in Qoheleth’s—and in our own—more joyous moments.

In the movie *Contact*, based on the book by Carl Sagan, the main character learns from her father that the best way to tune a long-distance radio is with “small moves,” a lesson that returns later in the climax of the movie. The rat’s hole, the kitchen table, the puppy, the family binge-watching—these are small moves. No, they aren’t *everything*, but sometimes small moves are all we can do. Sometimes—not all the time, but some of the time—they are also enough.

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