



Ecclesiastes: Preaching and Teaching Hope on the Edge of Orthodoxy

TRISHA WHEELLOCK

MAYO CLINIC DOES NOT BRING OUT THE BEST IN ME.¹

In early August 2022, I stood on a church lawn about a block from the Rochester hospital complex with my husband and sixteen-year-old son. I shouted, “This is pointless! What are we doing here? Is any of this even making a difference?” The space had soft grass, chairs you were invited to rearrange, and a prayer wall where you could tie ribbons and offer prayers. It is a space designed to care for the hurting. But I was tired of tying ribbons and offering prayers. Tired of blood draws, consent forms, and evaluating risk versus reward. Tired of everything being meaningless.

This past summer, our son enrolled in a new clinical drug trial. At age two, he had been diagnosed with an ultra-rare genetic disease called Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva (FOP). FOP is a progressive condition where the body grows a second skeleton; muscle, tendons, and ligaments turn into bone. Triggered by

¹ This comment is not a reflection on the quality of care at Mayo Clinic, which is world class. It is the outpouring of the mother of a teenager with a rare disease.

The traumas of life scream out at us, and we wonder whether there is any point at all. Ecclesiastes does not offer packaged hope but, amid all the good and bad of life, insists that Christians can treat others and themselves with compassion, and with the certain hope that God is greater than all these things and that God is with us.

inflammation, the body turns on itself, forming extra bones in places they shouldn't be. It impacts about one in one million people, and there are approximately seventy diagnosed cases in the United States. It's improbable that I would know about this condition, let alone that it would appear in my family. Yet, when he was two years old, our son developed a lump on the back of his neck. The straightforward path I'd carved for myself and my family vanished like dust in the wind. The meaninglessness of my plans for our future soon became evident.

Facing a diagnosis is difficult no matter the disease, but parents and caregivers of children with special healthcare needs live in a different category. When your child receives a diagnosis, your perspective on the world, faith, and God's almighty plan changes. Your priorities shift: you navigate new paradigms. And you look outside of platitudes and traditional sources of hope and encouragement, because those familiar clichés feel shallow in the face of your new reality.

The book of Ecclesiastes may seem like an unusual choice for biblical inspiration, but I find its emphasis on the practical aspects of living a meaningful life hopeful. From the first chapter, when Qoheleth reminds readers that everything is meaningless, to chapter three with its rumination on the seasons, Ecclesiastes emphasizes practical, observable wisdom. It laughs in the face of American cultural expectations of hard work and reward. The message of hope in Ecclesiastes is deeper than platitudes; it does not offer packaged hope. It acknowledges the hurt and pain of real life, of unanswered prayers, of silence and despair. The hope found in Ecclesiastes is gritty with rough edges, of hands that have gripped hard the unrelenting realities of life. Ecclesiastes reminds me that whatever the circumstances, the rain falls on the righteous and the wicked. Time and chance happen to us all, and all of the striving may be for naught.

The message of hope in Ecclesiastes is deeper than platitudes; it does not offer packaged hope. It acknowledges the hurt and pain of real life, of unanswered prayers, of silence and despair. The hope found in Ecclesiastes is gritty with rough edges, of hands that have gripped hard the unrelenting realities of life.

ECCLESIASTES IS AN OVERLOOKED TREASURE OF WISDOM AND HOPE.

The Revised Common Lectionary includes a reading from Ecclesiastes 3 every year between Christmas and New Year's Day. Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23 is read during year C in the season after Pentecost. It is fair to say Ecclesiastes is overlooked. My hope is that this article will make the book more accessible and that you will find within its pages a message of hope that teaches, preaches, and resonates. Its chapters, I have learned, describe a faith with depth and substance that has been forged in the trials of life.

A brief review of literary and historical background information may be helpful as you consider incorporating Ecclesiastes into your preaching and teaching. The book of Ecclesiastes is also referred to as Qoheleth. The name Qoheleth comes from a Hebrew feminine participle that means “gathering, assembly, congregation.”² It stands at the edge of orthodoxy in the canon. The rabbis in the Talmud said that both Song of Songs and Qoheleth render the hands unclean (M. Yadayim 3.5).³ Ibn Ezra, writing in the 1100s CE, said: “The Sages sought to withdraw the Book of Kohelet because of its many contradictions.”⁴ Acknowledging the differences between Ecclesiastes and the Torah and Prophets, the Talmud concludes that the reason for Ecclesiastes’ retention in the canon is impossible to discern with certainty but is probably due to the fact that “its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching.”⁵

Ecclesiastes, along with Proverb and Job, belongs to a classification of texts called wisdom literature. Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, which are part of the Apocrypha, are also included in the designation. Wisdom literature was ubiquitous in the ancient world, and examples exist from many of ancient Israel’s neighbors. Wisdom appeared in several different formats, from parents teaching their children, to character formation, to royal wisdom taught in monarchical settings.⁶ James Crenshaw defines wisdom as “the reasoned search for specific ways to assure well-being and the implementation of those discoveries in daily existence.”⁷ Even this definition strains to capture the diversity and breadth of the sapiential tradition. Different from the Prophets and the Torah, wisdom literature focuses on reason and observation and is both anthropocentric and theocentric.⁸ The premise and perspective of Ecclesiastes are quite different from the Law and the Prophets. As R. B. Y. Scott says in his Anchor Bible commentary on Ecclesiastes, the text describes an unknowable God who does not communicate with God’s own people.⁹

Instead, Qoheleth presumes that humanity will use reason and observation to make sense of the world and its vexing anomalies. It addresses humanity’s search for how to live a flourishing and prosperous life, that knowing God includes knowing the self. And it presumes we are capable of doing so. Even within the wisdom literature designation, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are texts with different perspectives and outlooks. Specifically, Ecclesiastes is not a recounting of

² R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible 18 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 192.

³ In other words, these books are not holy or considered sacred literature. Interestingly, the rabbis argued about whether Ecclesiastes did or did not defile the hands, with scholars on both sides. https://www.sefaria.org/English_Explanation_of_Mishnah_Yadayim.3.5.1?lang=bi.

⁴ Quoted in T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes: Translation and Commentary* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 4.

⁵ Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, 193–94.

⁶ James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 3–7.

⁷ Crenshaw, 15.

⁸ William Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 1–4.

⁹ Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, 193.

God's plan and intervention for God's people. Instead, in *Ecclesiastes*, Thomas Krüger identifies several themes: God and human beings; futility and fleetingness; time and chance; gain and portion; work and toil; wealth and poverty; power and dominion; wisdom and folly; and eating, drinking, and pleasure as the highest good.¹⁰ The emphasis is on "the right of every person to the possibility of enjoying life . . . that the awareness of the suffering of others restricts one's own enjoyment of life."¹¹ Krüger explains the perspective of *Ecclesiastes* this way: "Human beings experience themselves just as ambivalently as they experience God: they can act correctly and still not completely avoid guilt; they can experience happiness and still also be confronted with suffering."¹² Concerning a composition date, a fragment of *Ecclesiastes* dating to 175–150 BCE was found at Qumran. Based on linguistic features, as well as textual, political, and social circumstances, it's reasonable to think *Ecclesiastes* was written in the 200s BCE, but there is not consistent agreement. The book has been labeled "the strangest book" and "radical," and the writer "disillusioned" and "resigned . . . rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist, and a fatalist."¹³ Nestled between *Proverbs* and *Song of Songs*, *Ecclesiastes* makes us question what we know about God and God's plans for us.

I HAVE A BIAS TOWARD SMALL-TOWN PASTORS.

I work at Grand View University in a program designed to help rural pastors thrive. One generation off the farm, the seeds of my faith were planted and nourished in a small church in northwest Iowa, where I attended with my grandparents. My work with the Moses Project brings me back to my church roots, to overlooked places without fancy technology or staff. I ask the rural pastors in my program, "What do you need in order to thrive? How can we help you flourish in ministry?" *Ecclesiastes* has unique answers to those questions. *Ecclesiastes* is particularly compelling for rural people because of the rhythm of daily living, the connection to the seasons through planting and harvesting, and the particular emphasis on the practical.

Rural life is a combination of both the practical and the impractical. On a farm, everyone (people and animals) works and contributes to the family's survival and well-being. There are no bystanders in rural life. At the same time, one must hope in the face of overwhelming odds and in situations out of one's control. Will it rain at the appropriate time? What will the cattle market do? How does a war in Ukraine impact the price of fertilizer or a coup in South America affect the selling price of corn? Thriving, according to *Ecclesiastes*, involves ambiguity and perseverance, continuing to be faithful even when the future isn't clear.

¹⁰ Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 1–5.

¹¹ Krüger, 1.

¹² Krüger, 2.

¹³ Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, 191–92.

In his book *Old Testament Wisdom*, James Crenshaw titles chapter 5 “The Chasing After Meaning.” In the chapter, he explores five thematic foci in Ecclesiastes.¹⁴ These five themes, expressed in the sections that follow, are especially relevant for rural communities.

DEATH CANCELS EVERYTHING.

Rural folks understand death in ways people who live in urban places may not. On the farm, you are surrounded by death. Livestock, crops, pets, downtowns with closed storefronts, an aging population—old age, decrepitude, and decline are all around. We see it on Main Street, in the suicide rate of our farmers and young adults, and in the financial system that favors bigger as better and consumerism as the epitome of success. Yet, there is hope in the reminder of the finitude of all things. Our hope as people of faith rests in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This life is fleeting and this body mortal, but the promise of eternal life and the hope of the life to come provide believers a wider perspective. Yes, death cancels everything in this life, but this life is not all there is. And because our Redeemer lives and our hope is in the life to come, we can treasure the finiteness of our time here. Ecclesiastes encourages readers to eat, drink, and be merry (Eccl 8:15). It reminds us to savor family, friends, good food, and the simple pleasures of this life.

Yet, there is hope in the reminder of the finitude of all things. Our hope as people of faith rests in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This life is fleeting and this body mortal, but the promise of eternal life and the hope of the life to come provide believers a wider perspective. Yes, death cancels everything in this life, but this life is not all there is.

WISDOM CANNOT ACHIEVE ITS GOAL.

Crenshaw’s second focus reminds me of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor 1:18–20)

¹⁴ Crenshaw, *Old Testament*, 117–28.

It may seem counterintuitive to work at a university and admit the limits of wisdom, but many can relate to Qoheleth's words; we have been in situations where the wise choice does not produce the expected result. Many farmers lost family farms in the 1980s during the farm crisis and not by foolish choices of their own. We all know of someone who eats well, watches their diet, and is diagnosed with cancer at a young age. We have friends who are smart, work hard, and lose jobs and retirement savings as employers downsize. Righteousness does not guarantee reward, and pursuing wisdom does not always provide the hoped-for result. Ecclesiastes 12:12 carries a warning against too much learning, to which nearly every student (from elementary school to graduate programs) can relate: "Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." Does this mean one should not engage in learning and embrace ignorance? No. Rather, balance is needed, along with a reminder of the practical wisdom that preparation does not ensure success.

GOD IS UNKNOWABLE.

At first glance, this theme from Ecclesiastes is difficult to preach. The Bible is overflowing with stories of God revealing Godself and engaging in relationships with humanity. As people of faith, we expect God to communicate with us. The Bible is full of examples of God reaching out to humanity and extending grace and mercy in tangible ways. Yet, our sacred literature also mentions times of God's hiddenness. Psalms 42 and 89 both mention God hiding. The author of Ecclesiastes relentlessly pursues meaning in a quest to understand God and how the world works. Still, Qoheleth determines that everything is futile and God unknowable (Eccl 1:14). Yet, here is the hope: the author keeps asking, keeps searching, keeps pursuing. Sometimes that is all we can do. The rain does not fall, the child isn't healed, the family business closes, the family farm is lost, and yet for Qoheleth, the existence of God is not questioned. The author of Ecclesiastes does not move to atheism. Instead, the author wrestles, and so do we. Like Jacob in Genesis 32, who wrestles at the river Jabbock, so Ecclesiastes beckons us to wrangle with the inconsistencies and the silences. For communities of faith, how can we capture the paradox of God's silence and God's communication? It is authentic to acknowledge both these realities. How can we encourage those in our churches to pursue God while recognizing that God's divine work is sometimes not apparent?

THE WORLD IS CROOKED.

Of all of Crenshaw's themes, I find this one the most relatable. War, injustice, disagreement—this world is full of crooked things. For people of faith, our hope rests in the justice of the kingdom of God. Humanity is sinful, and this world treasures earthly things. Yet, we are called to love our neighbors anyway, to practice justice and mercy even though we are surrounded by those who won't reciprocate.

Because of Christ's enduring love for us, we love others. Ecclesiastes is right: this world is a messy place. God's love shines out of the chaos.

PLEASURE COMMENDS ITSELF.

With Crenshaw's first four themes in mind, you may be tempted to throw in the proverbial towel. You may wonder, Where is the hope, the grace, the gospel proclamation? After all, Ecclesiastes opens with one of the most infamous lines of sacred literature: "Meaningless, meaningless, says the Teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless" (Eccl 1:2). If it is all pointless, why bother?

I grew up in a tradition suspicious of joy. My family focused on work and volunteering at church. Hobbies were something other people engaged in; we had work to do. When I was a child, my grandfather told me about going on a fishing trip with a friend. He admitted he enjoyed the trip and told his friend he would go again as soon as he caught up with his work on the farm. My grandfather went on that trip in 1959. He is now eighty-two years old and has never been fishing a second time. Yet, Ecclesiastes offers a balance to our culture's extreme emphasis on work. Pleasure and joy are not blasphemous.

Historically, farm families worked hard to survive, and the Depression Era mentality of scarcity remains etched into the culture of rural places. But an over-emphasis on scarcity keeps us from experiencing the abundance of God's love and mercy. When we operate with a scarcity mindset, our fists are closed to our neighbors and sometimes to ourselves. Joy, laughter, and enjoyment are blessings to be savored; Ecclesiastes gives us permission to do so!

To have faith in spite of trouble, despair, misfortune; to trust in God even when life throws us difficulty and absurdity—that is what Ecclesiastes urges. To say, "I don't understand. I may never understand, this side of the kingdom of heaven, but I will be faithful to God's call. With God's help, I will respond in obedience and with grace and mercy. Because of Christ's love, I will love God and my neighbor despite a calamitous world."

ECCLESIASTES IS FOR EVERYONE.

In addition to my work with rural pastors, I teach classes in theology and liberal arts at Grand View. Students often ask me about my favorite Bible verse. I tell them it's Ecclesiastes 9:11–12:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

In verse 11, Qoheleth tells readers what he has observed. Those more capable do not necessarily fare better than those who are less so, the strong do not always win out over the weak, the wise do not eat more than the foolish, the smart are not assured of financial success over the foolish, nor do those with skill receive more favor than those without. In this astonishing affront to the American work ethic to achieve and ascend, Qoheleth reminds us what he has seen and what we have observed as well—time and chance happen to us all. These words are echoed in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:45: “For [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

What wisdom does the church have for a world hurting and searching? Does God care about me and my family and have a plan or direction for my son’s life? Six months into his drug trial, we are still waiting. Waiting to find out if he is taking the placebo, a high dose, or a low dose. Waiting to find out if the medication is effective and safe. A quick reading of Ecclesiastes can be ambiguous, and waiting in the ambiguity is hard. But what Ecclesiastes does do clearly is to give permission for people of faith to admit hurt and despair. To wonder if there is purpose and meaning and to question how God is at work in the world. Because we know from life experiences that the righteous do not always prosper or the wicked suffer. The book of Ecclesiastes reminds us to be compassionate to others and ourselves. Time and chance happen to all of us. We cannot predict diagnoses, deaths, or pandemics. What I can do, with God’s help, is treat my neighbor with kindness and grace. I can extend the same compassion to myself. I can commit to walking a path with others in my community and struggling together to make sense of vexing anomalies and inconsistencies.

But what Ecclesiastes does do clearly is to give permission for people of faith to admit hurt and despair. To wonder if there is purpose and meaning and to question how God is at work in the world. Because we know from life experiences that the righteous do not always prosper or the wicked suffer. The book of Ecclesiastes reminds us to be compassionate to others and ourselves.

When I was invited to write this article, I was thrilled. Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books. It has provided an opportunity to explore the theology of hope I experience whenever I read Ecclesiastes. Grace, redemption, and hope in the midst of meaninglessness!

However, the writing process turned out more difficult than I expected. I had to wrestle with Qoheleth’s words: Enjoy the now; we don’t know what is coming next. Is there indeed hope to be found when there is nothing new under the sun? When the best I can do is eat, drink, pour oil on my head, and wear white, because in Sheol, I can’t praise God (Eccl 9:8)? Does grace ring out of tragedy? Do the wicked receive their due and the righteous their reward? The book of Ecclesiastes,

like life, is full of hard questions and resists simple answers. It encourages readers to embrace joy in the present, because the future is unknown. To take life as it comes because preparation, faithfulness, and goodness do not ensure anything. To rest in the ambiguity.¹⁵

It requires wisdom and courage to confront contradiction, frustration, and the possibility of an unknowable God and remain steadfast in faith.

Ecclesiastes really is for everyone. ⊕

TRISHA WHELOCK is director of the Moses Project and a lecturer in religion at Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa. The Moses Project is a program designed to help rural ELCA pastors thrive. For information about the program, see www.mosesproject.org.

¹⁵ For a fascinating piece on ambiguity, biblical texts (including Ecclesiastes), and Margaret Atwood's book *The Testaments*, see Peter Sabo and Rhiannon Graybill, "Testifying Bodies," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Spring 2022), 131–47.