

“WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?”

Text: “God has made everything beautiful in its own time; also he
Has put eternity into man’s mind, yet in such a way that he cannot
find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

Ecclesiastes 3:11

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“What’s It All About?” When I told my wife how I intended to start our sermon this morning, she told me that she was going to hold her ears and close her eyes until it was over. Admittedly I had a more grandiose plan in mind when I first alerted her. The introduction took on more modest proportions as the week rolled along, and of course, I failed to share the more subdued approach with her. But then, you see, Peggy still has not recovered from the morning I asked you all to moo like cows and bleat like sheep during a recent sermon. So, if you see a smart, good looking woman somewhere near the back of the Sanctuary with her hands over her ears and her eyes squeezed shut, you can guess that it will probably be my Peggy. But then I fear there might be many others who will play “peek-a-boo” with the preacher before I am done. Anyway, I implied to her that I was going to open the sermon by singing and dancing the Hokey Pokey on the chancel steps. You know: “What’s It All About?”

The Hokey-pokey, I said: the lyrics you already know: “You put your left arm in; you put your left arm out; you put your left arm in; and you shake it all about; you do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around, That’s what it’s all about.” Twelve verses later (same tune) after all your other parts have gone in and out like crazy, the song mercifully ends: “You put your whole self in; You put your whole self out; That’s what it’s all about.” The introduction is over. Will one of the ushers please tell Peggy she can open her eyes?

Stay with me; we are heading somewhere important. Down in Margaritaville, my old down-the-street neighbor Jimmy Buffet caught the same gist when he recorded a song called: “What If the Hokey-pokey Is All It Is About?” Buffet goes like this; you can tap it along with a calypso beat if you desire:

The universe is running away
Leaving us further behind all day.
We can’t measure and we can’t see
It’s some elemental mystery.
What if life is just a cosmic joke?
Like an olive in your coke.
Maybe it’s all too simple
For our brains to figure out
What if the hokey pokey
Is all it really is about?

What Buffet’s song means, as well as the original, while sounding kind of trite, actually points to the central issue: When life moves along too fast, or when it all caves in, or when you can’t keep up: you have a choice: you can cave in and waste your energy perambulating around from pillar to post; or you can relax it a little and get all the gusto you can, for you do only go around once. You can pout and cry and stomp your feet, or you can laugh and sing and wait upon the Lord. If those are your choices, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that dancing and singing is the better one.

What is it all about? Scientists, philosophers and theologians and regular people like you and me all the way back to the aboriginal paintings of the Neanderthals on the walls of Mycenaean caves have been trying to figure it out. Plato and Aristotle, Galileo, Heisenberg, Einstein and all their kith and kin have pined to get their brains around the meaning of the Universe. In more recent days that wonder-of-a-man, Stephen Hawking, at Cambridge, is still peeking through his computer into the black holes of outer space to find his TOE, the” Theory of Everything,” how it all holds together. I get exhausted

just talking about it, and it is a little much for a Sunday Sermon. But, I reassure you once again, we are going somewhere. Hold on.

The territory is not all that unfamiliar to those who love the Lord. The Psalmist once pondered, “When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars in the sky, what is man/woman that you are mindful of us, and our children that you care for them? Yet you have made us a little lower than the angels.” (Psalm 8) Others in the Bible know the feeling, and of course all great music and literature try to circle the field.

When he found out that Lady Macbeth had died, King Macbeth concluded that the whole shebang makes no sense at all.

To-morrow, and To-morrow, and To-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
 Signifying nothing.

Shakespeare, Macbeth (Act 5, Scene5: 19-28)

A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing! Is that what it is? Wait a minute; Willie my boy, Macbeth was crazy. Or was that his wife? Anyway, distasteful as it is, it creeps dangerously close to what we read in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes: “What does man gain from all his toil under the sun? There is no remembrance of former things.” The Bible’s author says, “What is crooked cannot be made straight! I perceived after all my searching under the heavens all is vanity and chasing after the wind.”

And, in the third chapter, the author adds, in the words of our Text: “I have seen the business that God has given us to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; he has also put eternity into our minds, yet in such a way that we cannot figure out what he has done from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) Did you hear that? “God has put eternity into our mind, yet in such a way that we cannot figure out what God intended when he made the earth.”

I am always tempted to ask: “Why did you do it that way, Lord?” Why couldn’t you make it easy-peasy, like 1-2-3, or as simple and predictable as ice cream and apple pie? Why do you choose not to speak directly to your servants, as you did in the days of yore with Moses and Mary and Habbakuk and Obadiah? I wish I knew an answer, but I don’t! Not a clue. If I were God, I think I would whisper into somebody’s ear, as Robert Browning put it, but if God has whispered, I don’t know who he picked to share the news; it surely wasn’t me. Have you ever heard a sacred whisper?

Sure we have our hints and guesses, as T.S. Eliot called them, but the emphasis is on the guesses part. Good communication means telling people what you mean in short direct declaratory sentences. Right? Speech class 101, first lesson. Say it clearly and distinctly. That’s what they teach you in seminary: put it down on the bottom shelf where the common man can reach it. “We don’t want to go plodding

through the deep, dark and snowy woods, for we have all our other promises to keep.”(Robert Frost)
Why are the heavens so silent when I need to know what on earth to do next?

But oh dear, look at me, trying to inform God how he should run his world. How presumptuous, how impudent! But, I’m not really sorry, Lord....

So what is it all about? Let me slide some options by you and see if any of them are familiar to you. Number one possibility for what it is all about is, yes, the Hokey Pokey is an option, albeit a playful one. It stands for the whole ancient Epicurean attitude: “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we will die.” We say it, “You only go around once, so get all the gusto you can.” (That is really not what Epicurus taught, but it will do for now.) A whole generation clamored to climb aboard the beer commercial wagon. Not so many who believe that way are here at worship this morning; they were probably out too late last night. But I think it applies to a whole culture which is built on nothing less than the pursuit of pleasure, arising in the whole existentialist movement from Nietzsche to Sartre and on to Yoko Ono and Madonna. From a philosophical point of view, it begins with existence. It teaches that the center of the universe is you, and me and all of us. The feeling, acting human being is what matters and where it all begins.

At its peculiar breadth, stretching from Freud and his Pleasure Principle to Hugh Hefner and his mansion, it boils down to the idea (hold your ears again) that sexual activity and pleasure is what it’s all about. That’s exactly what a young teen-age girl told me back near the beginning of my ministry: “What else could it be about,” she asked, “that’s all boys ever want.” A half a century later we would have to expand it to include boys and men. A devoted woman complained to me some years ago that it seemed that all her husband wanted was a life-long play toy, not a person, not a woman, not a wife. Perhaps I am being unfair; but I have listened in on a lot of marriages and relationships through the years, and watched the pursuit of pleasure damage too many families. Men can be scoundrels; and God has not missed it. What’s it all about: first possible answer: It’s all about my pleasure.

Or two, if that is too personal and squeamish for you, avert your eyes away and look around the world, then say in unison with me, What’s It All About? “It’s all about money!” Repeat: it’s all about money. Now that things are getting rough, Wall Street and Main Street seem to agree that it was a misplaced greed. A few years ago, in the heyday of rising stocks, the New Yorker Magazine ran an autumn cover picture of a big old maple tree dropping hundred dollar bills down instead of leaves. The caption was “Do you have enough yet?” It was that easy. Then it escalated into real estate and the hedge fund tango, and lookee here, all the money’s gone away, and John and Jane Public are left holding the bag.

Not you, not I, of course; but our nation strolled along behind as if all that mattered was the accumulation of wealth, no matter what you had to give up to get it. We had a love affair with money; the love of which the Bible says is the root of all evil. Jesus praised the widow’s mite. He warned the rich young ruler. He told the scheming merchant building his bigger and bigger barns, “Go slowly, this night your soul could be required of you.” “Treasures are to be laid up in heaven, not on earth;” but we mixed it up and went flying off the other way. But, it was flying on one wing, and the wing fell off. Even a blind man can now see now that it is not all about money.

Or three, if that hits too close to home or is too scary for you, spin it around to the pervading belief and practice in which America surely believes: “It’s all about winning!” All about competition, all about sports, my team and yours. Whether you are in sports or sales or social interaction, in family life, in divorce and small claims court, or in business maneuvering, you are supposed to win and come out on top. The competitive spirit, we call it, is everywhere. Don’t ever be a chump! You and me and Chuckie Atlas are supposed to win and be the champs. “You can be all you that you can be, if you just try.” At its zenith we often hear the legendary American declaration on the playing field: “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing!” While that saying is normally attributed to Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the old Green Bay Packers, it was original with Red Sanders, Football coach of the UCLA Bruins half a decade before Lombardi went to Green Bay. Vince said he never said it that way, anyway: he said, “Winning isn’t everything. The ‘Will to win’ is every thing.” (Now don’t complain you can’t get this sort of Trivia over at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, or down at First Baptist. You might be on a game show someday and they might ask you who said it.)

Whatever, success in sports and in life is often judged by winning or losing. I once knew a successful Presbyterian Minister - you will have trouble believing this - who punched the umpire in the nose in front of his children and his wife at a Little League Game in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, because the ump called his ten year old son’s pitch a ball, when he thought it was a strike. And I heard a familiar refrain drifting down from the rafters in the words of old Grantland Rice:

When the One Great Scorer comes,
To write against your name.
He marks -- not that you won or lost -- ,
But how you played the game.

“How you played the game” is a good reminder, but I don’t think you think that is what it’s all about either. Winning is just the other side of losing. We could easily add a few more possibilities, like trying to look beautiful, or being in control, or having to be right, or you name your favorite, “What’s It All About?”

The last, fourth, that I will mention, is your faith in Jesus Christ, and the Lord’s faith in you. He is what it is all about -- the Son of God, our Savior. The last is the first in order of importance; in fact it is not only the first one, it is the only one. To find our way home, let’s go back to our text in Ecclesiastes. The author of the Book has a beguiling way about him, if you catch it. He can make you feel at ease and at home, for he is reflecting back what every thinking person has to face: Why? Does it all make sense and how does it all hold together? How did life begin and why did God make us the way he did? Why are there so many unanswered questions; why do people suffer or just grow old and die? Why don’t we settle in and enjoy each other. Koheleth is up against the hidden ways of God with his children.

On the one hand he is doing battle in the large cosmic sphere, the realm of the heavens and the earth. It can make you dizzy out there, swirling around in empty space with nothing to hold on to and nowhere to hang your hat. At another level, he is doing battle with the faith system he had inherited

from his fathers' generation. It was fine for them in their time, but times have changed. It is not a farmland anymore. He can no longer be so exclusive or claim a unique hold on truth. He is trying to find his own faith. His Forefathers had painted themselves into a corner, with no way out. But he is also doing battle against the shadows of his own soul, that's where all battles begin, usually in the middle of the night. Admittedly to us he is a little bit lost; but he keeps searching for a way to find his way back home.

This book is especially helpful today in the United States because he is writing in a time not unlike our own. His nation had become a veritable melting pot of people and ideas and religion. A whole new political system had arrived in Israel when Alexander the Great conquered them and brought Hellenism with him from Greece. It was benevolent enough towards Judaism and local religions. In the new climate any and all religions were permissible, so long as they did not deny the rights of others. Their exclusive claim to be the Chosen Ones of God stood in the way of that amalgamation. Alexander always attempted to unify local faith and culture into a larger, unified system. It didn't work; they held their ground, but they learned a lot about the future in the process.

Poor old Koheleth. He knew that some of the new ideas were worthy and enduring. But as always the question was which ones were which. Many generations in the course of history have married themselves to the present and became widows in the next. Koheleth was standing between two worlds and he was not comfortable in either one. And he didn't know what to do. He knew all about uncertainty: "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong; for time and chance happen to us all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) He was a realist, not a dreamer, but as always which things were real was the question. If you tear down the old order, what do you put in its place?

He does not doubt the existence of God, not at all; he just cannot be sure what on earth Jehovah is doing. He believed that we are made in the Image of the One Eternal God. (Ecclesiastes 8:17) He knew there were absolute rights and wrong; he tried a bunch of things to keep them steady, but none of them worked. Give him credit for tackling the problems head on, even if you don't like his answers. He wanted nothing more than to hear the voice of God and to know that all would yet be well. Yet he couldn't hear it. Surely you understand him when your life caves in. In the end his loneliness overwhelmed him. The pendulum kept swinging back and forth. Not much to hold on to there, but his book is still in the Bible to remind us of the diversity of the people God has to deal with, even those who don't know what to do.

But then (Are you listening?) St. Paul, with all his vaunted faith, still had his problems in that regard. In Romans 7 he confronts it head on: "I can decide to do what is right, but I cannot do it. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do the thing I want, I do the very thing I hate." And Jesus asked them a little earlier, "Why do you not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes you do not see; and ears you do not hear? And do you not remember?" (Mark 8: 17-18) Oh dear.....

Let me end now with a little summary comparison of Ecclesiastes and St. Paul, between the Old Testament and the New. I hope you have walked the journey with me in this sermon so we could get here honestly. Here we are, back home where we belong. Ecclesiastes ends with the endless journey going round and round, as endless as Jimmie Johnson will chase round and around the NASCAR in Homestead this afternoon. Koheleth decided to circle the prey until the journey finally ends. "Fear God and keep his commandments" is the most he can muster up. He can't remember where his people

had been, and he has not a clue of where we might be going. He pulled up to a stop at the end of the dead-end street and lingered there until his days on earth were through.

How sad, even though a ton of others do it too. George Bernard Shaw once whined that people fuss around and dig their gardens until it is time to dig their graves. “Awh, Shaw, Bernard, quit it. I don’t even have a garden!” C. S. Lewis wrote that Uncle Screwtape told his devil nephew Wormwood that most people sit around and “twiddle their thumbs and tap their toes until the twiddling, tapping days are done.” We all share the same experience but it is what we make of it that counts. We all hit the same wall of indecision now and then. We all fall on our faces from time to time. We all have moments when we don’t know where to turn. But it’s easy: you simply need to get up, turn around and keep on listening. “The one who is down”, the Shepherd boy sang in Pilgrim’s Progress, need fear no fall.” The price you pay for running is that occasionally you trip. The one who never fails or never worries is the one who sits down dejectedly with Koheleth on his dead end cul-de-sac. The one who gives up on himself/herself has never heard the message: “Behold, I can make all things new, if you allow me to.” Jesus Christ is speaking, and he can make good on the promise.

Jesus says you do not, need not, will not stay the way you are. That was the whole purpose of his coming. Oh sure, some of you would urge us to think that he came to offer us a guarantee to get to heaven. He did. But more, I think, he came to help us live the abundant life right here on earth. We don’t know a lot about heaven, only God knows that; but we know a lot about the earth. To learn to accept the forgiving love of God and then to share it with all the others in his world is what it really is about.

Poor old Koheleth; he never got to meet Jesus Christ, not in person anyway. That might be important to his message. But that is not your problem or mine this morning here at Sharon Church. Our question has nothing whatsoever to do with what the author of Ecclesiastes knew or did not know. Our question is what we know: whether we know Jesus Christ, and know him as a friend.

I surely hope you do, but my guess is some of you do not; or if you say you do, you are referring to a decision a long time ago. Have you met the Savior recently? New every morning is his mercy.

But oddly, important as that is, that is not your question either. The question is not whether you know Jesus Christ and whether you have invited him into your heart; the prior question is whether Christ knows you. Professor Merwyn Johnson sparked a marvelous emphasis the other night in our class on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He said, in parallel to our point, it is not so much whether you think Christ is in you and you have invited him to be your Savior. The real question is whether you are “In Christ.” There is a huge difference. It is whether you are a Christian in name, or whether you are totally immersed in the Savior. When you can answer that in the affirmative, then wherever Christ is, you will also be; and wherever you are, Christ will be with you wherever you go. When you get there, he will be there waiting. What more could you and I want? That’s what it’s all about, and you can dance and sing around it anyway you choose, for now and forever more. Amen.