

Our reading today by Hope Shaffer is from a writer who lost hope in a central tenant of his tradition—the hope of a glorious future. Ecclesiastes is a sly, subversive writing in the middle portion of the Hebrew Bible called “The Writings,” also called Wisdom Literature. This middle portion includes other internal critiques of conventional Jewish (biblical) wisdom. The book of **Job** is a critique of the idea that God rewards the righteous & punishes the unrighteous. **Song of Songs** is an erotic love poem, featuring 2 young, unmarried lovers, where the dominant voice belongs to the woman--an affront to the ancient patriarchy that tried, especially, to control female sexuality. There is freedom within this tradition to question, to challenge, to doubt, to disagree with even deeply entrenched theological perspectives. This freedom is part of the tradition, and that continues in the Newer Testament.

The book of **Ecclesiastes** gives voice to someone in profound religious disillusionment. The anonymous author can't bring themselves to even mention Israel's glorious past—the Exodus from Egypt, the reign of King David. As the Mexican theologian, Elsa Tamez says, Ecclesiastes is for when our Horizons Close—we cannot see a future worth hoping for. And hope for a glorious future was at the heart of Israel's faith. Even the most pessimistic prophets, like Jeremiah saw a glorious future ahead. Not this writer. This writer is part of a nation on its third round of oppression spanning centuries now—first it was exile in Babylon Exile, then the Persian Empire, now they are overrun by Greeks (who will profane their rebuilt temple in time.) It's too much. To make matters worse, the writer seems to have had recent bad luck in their love life, which cast a shadow over everything and will put most of us into an existential funk. But it's an existential funk expressed as religious disillusionment: What does it mean to be Jewish when your Jewish view of the world seems like fairy tale?

When our picture of the future is bleak (say, for political reasons as is the case with Ecclesiastes) and that forlorn future turns your faith upside down (something that provides a lot of meaning in your life) and then you add some very personal challenge (like bad luck in the love life department) ... you're in the kind of place where Ecclesiastes speaks to you. Maybe you're not there now, with the writer. But chances you will visit this station again.

Many of feel this intensely today: our sense of the future (whether democracy can rebound in the face assault, the future of our daily lives shadowed by Covid) is intensified into a religious identity crisis owing to the complicity of so much especially white Christianity with horrors like Christian nationalism (to mention one.) If we have white family members caught up in

conspiracy theories and the rest, chances are they identify as Christians: Catholic, Evangelical ... major sectors of the landscape have abandoned their founder, the God of the Oppressed, when it really counts. Even congregations in the so called liberal or progressive denominations, tiptoe around toxic beliefs like Christian Nationalism at the local congregational level. We're left hoping these forms of so-called Christianity shrink until they can reform enough to be worth saving. You can see this vexes me.

The book of Ecclesiastes is important in a time like this. I recommend the Robert Alter translation. If only to understand this: This book is written by an anonymous writer around middle of the third century before the Common Era. The writer creates a narrator and gives the narrator a name. Older translations name this figure *Ecclesiastes* (from the Greek translation of the original Hebrew). But the Hebrew name for the narrator is *Qohelet* [Q-o-h-e-l-e-t, pronounced Ko-hee-let]. Unusual thing about this Hebrew name: it has feminine ending *et*. Masculine form is *Qo-hee-lel* but this is the feminine form *Qo-hee-let*. Written or influenced by a woman under cover? Wisdom literature does highlight a feminine aspect of the divine (Sophia in GK) whereas the divine name YHWH is masculine. In a patriarchal culture, is it the feminine voice that becomes the challenging-subversive voice? Duh.

Even so, the details of Qohelet or Ecclesiastes are less important than its existence in our sacred writings. What does its placement here in holy text signify? Contrary to the dominant and corrupt expressions of faith that give God a bad name today, the presence of writings like Job, like Song of Songs, like Ecclesiastes tell us:

1. We're part of a faith tradition that makes room for subversive voices, questioning voices, and isn't afraid of "critique from within." There are many examples, not least of which, Jesus, who like other Hebrew prophets offered critique from within of even sacred concepts within his tradition (like sacrifice.) One of the refrains of the Sermon on the Mount is "you have heard it said, but I say to you." This wasn't a departure from his Jewishness but an expression of it.
2. We're also part of a faith tradition that makes room for disillusionment. (Disillusionment is not opposed to faith, it's part of the faith journey: Susan King, Sue Brokaw, trained in the art of spiritual direction where this is a given) Again, Jesus himself uttered words of profound disillusionment at the time of his death, when holy people are supposed to say, like my grandmother just before she died, "Oh look, the angels!" Jesus last words in two gospels (Mt. Mk) not so uplifting: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some of my most treasured experiences of the divine were preceded by a time of

disillusionment. Sometimes the old wells have to dry up before we dig new ones. Disillusionment can purify faith, can signal the birth pangs of a deeper faith. But it doesn't feel like it at the time.

Today, offer a meditative practice to center us in any difficult time, including periods of disillusionment. Rachel Johnson (Rachel and Joseph are new members, having moved recently from Chicago) will help with this. After a minute of a guided meditation, Rachel will play a Leonard Cohen song, Halleluiah. On piano, but just humming the verses, but singing the chorus. A word about this song. Cohen wrote Halleluiah in 1984, but it wasn't popular for years. It finally gained traction when it was used in the movie Shrek in 2001; then Cohen died on November 7, 2016—the day before a distressing election here in the U.S. And this song took off. Cassie did it for Christmas Eve mashed up with O Holy Night. The melody is “melancholic, fragile, uplifting, even joyous” all at the same time. I read where Cohen wrote part of it in a New York hotel room where he was banging his head on the floor. So this song, like Ecclesiastes, came out of anguish.

I'm going to suggest we combine listening to this song with letting our focus rest on a person whose way of doing faith, of doing a God-aware life, inspires us. I mentioned my mentor-pastor back in Detroit (Toledo and West Grand Blvd for you Detroiters, Jalen Rose's neighborhood for you basketball fans.) This is the man who helped my dad recover from a major depressive episode in 1972. In all the ups and downs of my faith journey, he was in the background inside my head as a kind of plumb of what's real or can be. Then, not so long ago, Dick, who is in his 90's, wrote me the sweetest email to say he deeply regrets holding the traditional view on LGBTQ, he now sees he was wrong, and he thanked me. I was like, “OMG I have my hero back.” Then he had his wife Jean read the book Emily and I wrote, *Solus Jesus*—he has macular degeneration—and he sent me another email, commending what we had done. Plus, he sends out devotional emails to probably hundreds of people who came to love him over the years—calling out Christian Nationalism and all this. So I love this man.

But there are quieter versions of real faith. I mentioned my father-in-law Charles Huttar. He was raised in a fundamentalist home (not a toxic one, a loving one) but his parents prayed daily for some grandkids studying science—that they would learn enough to get an A and then promptly forget what they learned. Charles became an English professor specializing in Milton, C.S. Lewis (who he interviewed in person twice) JRR Tolkien (spent an hour in Tolkien's private study while Tolkien went to an appointment.) As young man he transitioned to a progressive form of Christianity, which I'm sure troubled his parents. Then at the age of 88, when I'm trying

to convince him not to go grocery shopping in person during Covid, he up and goes to a Black Lives Matter rally in Holland Michigan, not far from buildings named after the DeVos family.

And there are many at this service today I could easily include among those whose way of doing faith, inspires me. When some image of a Christian Nationalist mob, some bozo insurrectionist forming a prayer circle to a god I don't know, I cleanse my thoughts—this invasion of my sacred space—with thoughts of you.

I'm taking a Zoom class on Jewish mourning practices (Mourning & Mitzvah), led by Annie Rose the retired cantor at Temple Beth Emeth. She led us in a meditation on a beloved ancestor. For some reason my father's mother, Gladys Winifred, came to mind. I often stayed for a week at her house. Annie had us remember our loved on in the setting we knew them in, so I called to mind my visits, her little house on Calvin Street and getting as much Double-Mint gum as I wanted, no restrictions. I'd go with her to church of course, but she would make it worth my while with a trip to the dime store the next day. It occurred to me in the meditation—people said she was nervous and anxious a lot (she had a hard life!) but I never felt that around her. Just love, warmth, the blue light of the black and white TV animating her face, as she got all excited about a Red Wings game (born in Canada) And I realized in the meditation, even when I feel anxious, I can still love so people experience those things from me—that's ancestor strength in me. So you can rest your awareness on someone who has channeled a loving Gods love to you.

This can be a spiritual practice. We are surrounded as Scripture says, by a cloud of witnesses who are with us, cheering us on in our leg of the race.

If you'd like to do this, get comfortable in your chair, place your feet squarely on the floor and begin by noticing the weight of your body pressing down. Notice how your body feels by scanning down, starting with the head—any areas of tension, warmth, tingling, just notice...The face, the ears and jaw, back of the head...Neck, shoulders, upper arms, chest, lower arms, midsection, lower back, upper legs, lower legs, ankles, feet. Now shift your awareness to your breathing...Feel the air enter your lungs and belly, feel the body expand, and feel it soften as you breath out...Keep that focus on a few breaths...and now that we're centered a little bit, is there someone your life—your past or present—who has been a channel of divine love, compassion, kindness, acceptance. Let your focus rest on the memory of that person...Maybe where you would interact with them, notice the surroundings. It's not important that you have vivid memory, just notice the good feeling you have around that person...And now if you'd like, continue to remember them, as Rachel offers Leonard Cohen's Halleluiah as a prayer.