

Sometimes we inherit a mental image of God. It could involve a hell-sender who must torture unfortunate sinners with eternal conscious torments. Or a smiley-face emoji-deity who is milquetoast nice. Hopefully we make adjustments as we go along—we recalibrate our understanding of God as we accumulate experience. We sort through many images, pictures, or projections of God. I always heard God was all-knowing, all powerful, all-loving, all-wise, all merciful, all just. Six abstractions that never really moved me. We also have the Jewish genius of depicting God as a character in stories of many different kinds. Like in Genesis 2 where God kneels down on the ground to form a human out of the soil, then breathes into them—the first mouth-mouth-resuscitation. We have the stories of Jesus where God is depicted in quirky ways—as a daft woman who loses a coin at night and keeps her neighbors awake searching high & low for it. Religious or Faith Traditions provide us with the raw material to shape our understanding.

Just as we don't usually make up our own languages—that would be A LOT OF WORK and wouldn't talk to anyone but ourselves—we do our quest for God anchored to a tradition. When I was 19 needing a missing piece in my life, I found myself drawn to the Jesus of the gospels. I knew, even at that tender age, that I only had one lifetime (probably) and there was no way I was going to be married and a parent (which I was at the time) graduate college, get a full-time job, AND explore even say 3 major religious traditions enough to figure which of those 3 was “the best.” I had been a teenage atheist, but I was feeling myself wooed by God through this Jesus connection; so I took a deep breath and went with it. Despite stepping on a few rusty nails laying around in my tradition, it's where I've found my way. Doesn't mean I don't learn helpful things from other religious traditions—I'm on my third year of Headspace, a Buddhist mindfulness meditation app. O praise Inter-Faith me!

But when I first came to my Jesus version of faith, I had been reading some of the post-war existentialist writings, like “Search for Meaning” by Victor Frankl. Sounds heady but Frankl survived the Nazi death camps and this book sold 12 million copies. He says we chose to find meaning in the face of our suffering and the search for meaning is more powerful than the search for pleasure. Existentialism came out of the period when Western culture was in a state of deep disillusionment. 20<sup>th</sup> Century was supposed to be

the century of steady, inevitable progress but it got way laid by WWI, Great Depression, WW2, the Holocaust, Atom Bomb, environmental disaster, and growing awareness by some white Americans, how our American Revolution was conducted by slaveholders and followed by the cultural and actual genocide of the people who first inhabited this land. Sins we still haven't reckoned with. So here I was a new dad, thinking these thoughts, eligible to be drafted into army during Vietnam, wondering what life was about. I could be excused for turning to God! 2020 reminds me so much of 1971, except for the global pandemic part.

So my first dip into what we called the Old Testament, after an aborted attempt to read Genesis, was the book of Ecclesiastes. Why Ecclesiastes? because I liked "Turn, Turn, Turn" covered by the Byrds in 1965. I didn't grow up with Bible stories, so reading the other parts of the Old Testament made me feel stupid at first. And you DO NOT WANT TO FEEL STUPID when you're 19. You don't yet realize what delights begin with feeling stupid.

We know the author of this book goes by the penname Qohelet, a coy penname because it is a woman's name. And the author adopts the voice of a King in Jerusalem very much like Solomon, who was known for 3 things: building the first temple, asking God for and receiving Wisdom, and having many wives and concubines. No one thinks the writer of Ecclesiastes actually was Solomon. The ancient conventions of authorship were much different than modern conventions of authorship. Sometimes the named author of a book of Scripture is accurate by modern standards (i.e., was that person in actual history) but often not. Paul's writings for example are divided into the undisputed letters (the ones we know were written by the apostle Paul) the disputed letters (the ones that were probably written by later followers of Paul's teaching who wrote under his name.) No one got arrested for plagiarism—this was the convention of the time, to ascribe certain writings to other figures. If I were still in an evangelical church I'd have to say, "Everybody calm down!" or "Please come back I'm not done yet."

With that meandering intro let us read today's portion: Ecclesiastes 2: 1–11

*I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But again, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup>I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" <sup>3</sup>I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—**my mind still guiding me with***

**wisdom**—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. <sup>4</sup> I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; <sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup> I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines

<sup>9</sup> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; **also my wisdom remained with me.** <sup>10</sup> Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup> Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

3 preliminary remarks, before the surprising thing about Qohelet's vision of God.

1. This is part of the Hebrew Bible called "The Writings" or "Wisdom Literature" and wisdom in the Hebrew bible is a divine attribute personified as a woman. A woman who dances with God and with humans. A Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (in wide use by Jews of the period) called this lady, "Sophia."
2. This may be part of the reason for the author of Ecclesiastes coy penname being Qohelet, a woman's name. So Ecclesiastes is a work of divine feminine wisdom.
3. Before we get all high and mighty about this writer's words about owning slaves, let's remember the writer is Qohelet, writing as though they were Solomon (even though Solomon is long dead) and it's fine for us to condemn Solomon or anyone's slave holding. While we're at it we should feel some distress for enjoying cheap stuff from Amazon made by people working in conditions we wouldn't want to work in, and in the fact that "essential workers" during the pandemic include many not even making a living wage. Let's not project our collective guilty conscience on a literary figure so we can ignore these things. Let's do our work and change these bad realities that some of us benefit from.

Preliminaries over, what surprising thing does this portion reveal about God?

**God is at ease with humans who feel a need to find out for themselves what is meaningful, wise, or leads to happiness, by performing some failed experiments. This is a corrective for “fear of making mistakes” as an excuse for wisdom.**

**Let’s read this portion again noticing where wisdom is to be found in it:**

*I said to myself, “Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But again, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup>I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” <sup>3</sup>I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—**my mind still guiding me with wisdom**—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life ...*

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Some of things the writer has the Solomon-like King experiment with were things we would say were good. *Enjoy simple pleasures in life, laugh!* Some were dodgy or downright bad ideas. Some were “well, not bad in moderation, but I’m not sure you’re focused on moderation right now” like when it says, *“I searched how to cheer my body with wine”* If your 21-year-old says, “Hey mom I’m going out now to search how to cheer my body with wine” you’re like, “Oh, be careful! Take an Uber! Better yet, stay home!” But it’s at this point we have this counter-intuitive insertion: “Hey mom I’m going out now to search how to cheer my body with mind—**don’t worry my mind still guiding me with wisdom.**” To which Mom says who is this Wisdom, can she text me? Then follows other experiments: building projects, botanical gardens, water works to bring water into arid places so trees can grow, buying more slaves, accumulating great wealth, forming a choir, and indulging in the delights of the flesh, including what was available to all kings of this era, including kings in Israel, concubines.

You notice the author never has the king say, “Then I came to my senses and repented of all the bad things I did.” Instead, we are assured that wisdom was with this experimenter in his quest to see for himself what leads to happiness and meaning all along the way.

Qohelet’s vision of God includes a divine presence at ease with the fact that sometimes we humans have to learn for ourselves through a process of experimentation. And that what we might call failed experiments in happiness are part of learning what true happiness entails.

This perspective is especially helpful for those of us who are afraid of making mistakes with God, or in life. Fear of making mistakes is not part of the “glorious liberty of the children of God” that Paul speaks of. Children, by virtue of being children do make mistakes, but they have someone to help them when they do. Children don’t learn by fearing mistakes. They learn by understanding that mistakes happen and are not disasters, but part of the learning process. Children learn by playing, a form of learning in which mistakes are more or less irrelevant. Wisdom is depicted in Proverbs as a playful divine being. Did you learn to ride a 2-wheeler when you were focused on your fear of falling, or when you said, “Oh what the heck, if I fall, I fall!” Did you ever fall in love while focused on your fear of what might happen if the person you love disappoints you, or for that matter dies?

Those of you who are gay and were raised in a homophobic church tradition may have faced this. You finally met someone who was a suitable match for you even though the people around you were freaked out. And perhaps you had internalized their fear as is natural to do. You were paralyzed so long as you were afraid of making a mistake and the people around you mistook that fear for wisdom. But somewhere in your heart, you knew otherwise, and so you put the mute button on that voice in your head that warned you that you were making a mistake, and you let yourself be the person you are—and in so doing you stepped into reality where God also resides and into glorious liberty of the children of God.

One of the tenants of existentialism is that we are never more human than when we are choosing. That there is something sacred, something holy about choosing. That God is in

our choosing even when we make what could be regarded as the wrong choice. God chooses and we choose being in God's image and likeness.

My departed wife Nancy was stressing over one of her kids making choices she was nervous about. She took a nap in a funk one Sunday afternoon. During the nap my mother, who had died too young some years earlier, but was a more nurturing mother figure to Nancy than her own mother was, came to Nancy in a dream and said, "Tell Maja she has a choice." My mother was culturally British. She didn't give unsolicited advice and if she did so she would do it indirectly. Nancy understood this was Blanche's indirect way of saying to her, "Maja is exercising her choice and that is her sacred prerogative—give her the room she needs." Nancy woke up refreshed having been led by her dream into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

One last thing: Jesus would have known this text, and liked it, I think. (And we do know Jesus had a special identification with the divine feminine aspect of God) The evidence I think is in the fact that people regarded as sinners—this was more of a religious outcast category than a sin category—these people regarded Jesus as their friend. If I hear one more non-affirming pastor say, "I love gay people!" I think I might scream. Gay people know that when a pastor says, "I love gay people!" it's time to head for the exits. It's like the white pastor who says, "I'm not a racist!" What that means is "I'm denying my unconscious bias" which means "I'm not even trying to overcome it." But Jesus was known as a friend of sinners by the people who were classified as sinners by the religious gatekeepers of their day. When the gatekeepers said, "he's a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners" that was shorthand for he "enjoyed a good party," and "the people who don't invite us to their parties invite him."

I think Jesus, informed by Ecclesiastes, knows that God is way more at ease with ordinary people than we give God credit for. I think Jesus, informed by Ecclesiastes, knew God was at ease with people who need to kick the tires, to see for themselves what is wisdom and what is folly and what leads to true happiness by a kind of trial-and-error process. I think he saw in such people—maybe even in us—agents exercising their sacred prerogative of choosing, pursuing life not avoiding mistakes. I think these were the people Jesus felt were good soil for his teaching. Maybe this is part of why Jesus said more than anything else, "Do not be afraid."

This understanding is a surprise gift from Qohelet that I would like to absorb into my understanding of God, who is full of surprises.