

Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Christians and War

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Pastor Aaron Johnson

This morning, we're going to continue and conclude our sermon series entitled: "Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White." Specifically, we're going to be talking about Christians and war. Hopefully, that's the Spirit moving through the congregation! We're going to look at Ecclesiastes, chapter 11, verses 1 through 10. And while you're turning there, I've got to let you know that that helmet that I used for the Children's Moment took me all week to put back together. And if there are any E-9s, enlisted sergeant majors or above in the congregation this morning or watching us online, I apologize. I'm fully aware that I should have had the chinstrap snapped, but this microphone was getting in the way, and so, if you'll just grant me some forgiveness...

Ecclesiastes 11, verses 1 through 10. Would you please stand with me as we read from God's Word?

Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.
Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.
If the clouds are full of rain,
they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.
He who observes the wind will not sow,
and he who regards the clouds will not reap
As you do not know the way the Spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.
In the morning sow your seed and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike might be good.
Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.
So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.
Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.
Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Would you please be seated?

You may not know it, but my wife and I are avid coffee drinkers, and recently one of our favorite shops was taking their operations to the field for a weekend Harvest Festival. As Harvest Festivals go, this event had all the hallmarks of the season: pumpkins, corn mazes, hay rides. Several craft-y shops were even setting up inside a freestanding barn. Our plan was to leave right from church and catch this event on our way home. Well, toddlers are the antithesis to any great plan! And while I made it to church, Sarah and Adelynn did not. I told her, "Don't worry. You guys get ready, and I will meet you there." By the time I pulled into that field, it had become unseasonably warm for an

October day. And there I was in my black church suit, pulling a stroller out of my car. After putting Adelynn in the stroller, we began the trek across the parking lot, which was really just a section of the field that had been roped off. The stroller wasn't set for uneven ground, so I pushed and pushed as the wheels seemed to work against me. By the time we got to our destination I was both sweaty and dusty and out of place in this black suit. Sarah asked me, "Where do you want to start?" and the obvious answer was, coffee. So, we got in line. The good news was, it turns out that there was live music at this event. Sarah and I were tapping our toes and Adelynn was tapping her hand on that little crossbar on the front of her stroller. And so we got our coffee, and I knew what Sarah would want to do next: the craft-y shops. Adelynn and I found a spot not too far from the solo singer/guitarist, and so I parked her next to a bench and watched her continue to tap out the beat while Sarah walked inside the barn to scope out the goods.

And as Adelynn continued to tap out the tune, I began to watch the musician and really pay attention to the lyrics. I noticed his guitar case was covered with stickers, which is not unusual. But as I started looking, I noticed that many of his stickers were army-related. He had unit designations that I knew, mostly Washington National Guard units. Then I noticed some deployment-related stickers: units, dates, locations. Some were in Iraq, and some were in Afghanistan. Then I kind of chuckled. It turns out his Iraq times were very close to my Iraq times. His Iraq locations were very close to my Iraq locations. Turns out, we probably knew some of the same conflict, the same challenges, and the same bad guys. Heck, we probably even worked for some of the same good guys. But then I started listening to the lyrics. He was good. And his style, solo acoustic guitar, was among my favorites. It had blues, country western. He was placing tones of sadness, the loss of great joys, in the midst of longing and wonder and a search for significance. This guy knew what he was talking about. He was telling the story of lost marriages, lives destroyed by direct fire and indirect fire on the battlefield, hints of bullets and rockets and mortars, and of survivors being finished off in addiction and loneliness. This guy had been there. It was clear that he had lost friends, lost his marriage, and was on the verge of losing his relationship with his kid. He openly wondered if it would not have been better had he never come home. And running through it all was a single thread, a single refrain that asked, "What did it all mean?" In that moment I found myself sobbing uncontrollably. I struggled to pull myself together as my daughter, the child that I accepted I would never have, continued to tap out the beat of the song on the crossbar of her stroller. I wiped my eyes and turned her stroller slightly, hoping that she wouldn't see. I thought of my wife who was going to come out and find this blubbering mess, the wife who had had to endure the ordeal of a husband gone twice to war, a husband whose career was not all it should have been, a husband figuring out how to put a lot of things back together. But what stung the most was that I was enjoying a warm day with the two people I loved the most, the very things that the musician before me had lost as a result of experiences so similar to mine that for all intents and purposes they could be the same.

Our Father in heaven, in upholding His creation, allows the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Here were two men: one enjoying the sun, and the other trying to sell his rain. And I was wrestling with whether or not I deserved any of it. I didn't deserve to be in the sun any more than he deserved to be in the rain. And there was that note, there was that refrain: What did it all mean?

Everyone who came in this morning came in with something. Are you drenched with rain, or have you been basking in the sun? You know, it almost doesn't even matter.

The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a season for everything. And if I know anything about seasons, they are cyclical. Are you wet? Just wait, the sun is going to dry you out. Don't look too intently at the sun; there are usually storm clouds somewhere on the horizon. I also know that, just as some places get more rain, some people seem to get more of their fair share, too. Some sun, some rain. Sun, rain, sun, rain. If you're lucky, you get more sun than rain. And then you die. Meaningless. It seems almost cliché, but there it is.

Our text this morning starts with poetry. The first four verses are poetry: poetry that contains a series of succinct statements meant to impart wisdom. "Cast your bread upon the waters," a euphemism designed to encourage the reader of Solomon's day to continue to work. "Give a portion to seven or even to eight," another euphemism designed to remind the reader that you can't take it with you, so you might as well give much of it away. "Clouds that are full of rain will produce rain and a tree that falls in the woods will remain where it falls." Here the writer warns that if you worry too much about what you should do, you run the risk of ending up doing nothing. And if you end up doing nothing, well, you'll never be prosperous. The book of Ecclesiastes declares that all is vanity. The writer simultaneously holds that to do nothing is even more vain. Even though you do not know what will and what will not prosper, doing something is clearly better than doing nothing. You'd better sow in the morning, and once you've got that sown, then you'd better be active at night. We've got to stay busy; maybe something's going to work out. He does concede that life is sweet, and even implies that it is better than death. In fact, if you have lived a long life, you should rejoice. But be careful, because death is longer than life, isn't it? What about youth? They should surely rejoice. But no. Judgment is coming for the young as well. Youth, old age, long life: all vain. In fact, the dawn of life, the moment in which you were born, is vain. Vain vanity. Vain, vain, vain vanity.

And in essence, this chapter is a summary of all of Ecclesiastes: Life is vanity; life is empty of meaning. Ecclesiastes, as a whole, is an exploration of the barren meaningfulness of life: a life in which the sum total of the joy to be expected exists within the context of your own ability to be prosperous. So work: work that you might be prosperous, because the only thing you can hope for is long life and a long life of prosperity. And yet, the writer is hinting at something else, too. He tells the reader to remove vexation from your heart. He says, "Don't worry." It sounds like we've got a lot to worry about, but the writer says, "Don't worry." He is hinting at something. He doesn't know what God is working at, but he knows that God is working at something.

One commenter notes that Ecclesiastes is striking for its omission of God. It makes no mention of Yahweh, the Lord, the name of the God of Israel's covenant faith. It scarcely refers to the law of God. It scarcely refers to the nation of Israel. And the question for this commenter is: Why? This commenter goes further to note that in Ecclesiastes, nothing depends on revelation, because it describes the highest form of meaning apart from God. Apart from God, the best that you can hope for is the ability to work hard that you might prosper. And that's where the writer of Ecclesiastes was. I don't think Solomon himself, in all his wisdom, could fathom what God was doing. And yet he was hoping that God was doing something. In fact, God was. In God's infinite wisdom, He was filling up His counsel; establishing His promises; revealing His requirements in the law; articulating in the histories of Israel, through the prophets, what only He could accomplish. And in every real sense, from the moment of creation, He had been diligently working at His work.

And then, when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Jesus, the Son of God, entered His creation and declared, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news."

What does it all mean? It means that all of creation was created for you by God. It means that you were created by God for an intimate relationship with the very One who created. It means that He knew you would mess it all up, and that since then, He has been working to restore you to that intimate relationship. It means that you can live forever in that relationship. "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so." This is what it means: Jesus loves you so much, He was not going to leave you apart from Him.

I know what you're thinking: "Christians and war. Where are you going, Aaron? Why does this sermon have to come from a soldier?" Because it takes a soldier who knows he is already dead to convince another soldier, who thinks he is about to die, to act boldly and bravely. Only a soldier, in the moment of risking his own life and limbs, can tell another soldier, risking the same, to stand up and fight on. Make no mistake: Life is war, and war is hell. And only the gospel message can deliver. Only the gospel message can deliver what "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of men imagined," in any meaningful or believable way, against the backdrop of the horrors that is this life.

It doesn't matter what wounds you came in with this morning. It doesn't matter what fight you are fighting. Remain steadfast. "For when you have stood the test, you will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him." Because He took on your punishment, any struggle you are wrestling with right now is just rain. And only somebody who knows how bloody and hard that rain is can say, "Hey, man, it's just rain."

For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build up, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to seek, a time to lose, a time to keep, a time to cast away, a time to tear, a time to sew, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

There is only one meaning that is significant enough to transcend each and every of the times listed here. Don't look for meaning anywhere else. That Jesus loves you transcends everything else. Let's pray.

Lord, we just thank You for today. And Lord, I lift up every single heart that is in this room and I just pray that You would find them, and that You would remind them of Your love in such a way that it could be only Your love. Is it so easy? Is it so easy that we can find meaning in a simple kid's song? Praise the Lord that it is. Let us never forget Jesus loves us. In Your precious name, amen.

Benediction:

That was heavy. And now I'm going to send you out those doors into a battlefield. And I'm going to leave you with the words of Horatio Nelson, Lord Admiral of the British Navy, on the night before Trafalgar, facing the combined strength of the Spanish and the French. He knew that his officers were scared. He knew what they were about to face. He briefed them on their plan. It was a good plan. And he said, "Now, you're going to find yourself in a situation where you can't hear. Smoke, cannon balls, pieces of wood are going to be flying through the air, and you will have no idea how it's going or what to do. So, I'll give you this one thing. Take your ship, put it beside a French ship or a Spanish ship and just keep letting them have it. You can't go wrong."

We are going to leave this sanctuary. We are going to go back into the battlefield that is life, and you are going to find yourself surrounded, outnumbered, explosions in the air, and you are going to wonder, "What does it all mean? And what do I do now?" And you will probably not be able to hear that still, small voice. But the spirit is the same. It's the one thing I want you to do: Find that person that needs God's love and keep giving it to him on the off chance that they might make it out of this alive, too. And all of God's people said, "Hallelujah! Amen."