

A New Year
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UUMSB

Readings:

Tao Te Ching – Stephen Mitchell Translation Chapter 23

Express yourself completely,
then keep quiet.
Be like the forces of nature:
when it blows, there is only wind;
when it rains, there is only rain;
when the clouds pass, the sun shines through.

If you open yourself to the Tao,
you are at one with the Tao
and you can embody it completely.
If you open yourself to insight,
you are at one with insight
and you can use it completely.
If you open yourself to loss,
you are at one with loss
and you can accept it completely.

Open yourself to the Tao,
then trust your natural responses;
and everything will fall into place.

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1 – NRSV

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

Sermon:

The Book of Ecclesiastes is interesting to consider on the first Sunday in a new year. It is part of what is referred to as Wisdom Literature in Hebrew Scripture, together with the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs. Ecclesiastes is ascribed to Solomon, the wealthy and powerful king who built the great temple in Jerusalem, but the book was written long after Solomon was gone, probably around the time of the Maccabees, about 200 BCE.¹ It was a Biblical tradition to ascribe authorship to well known persons and to write in their voice.

I find the book particularly interesting because it is so different from most of the rest of the Bible. Rather than a relational God, or people seeking to know God’s will, or even talking about a relationship with the holy, Ecclesiastes is very philosophical—God is a distant and unknowable force. The book is almost existentialist, that we live our lives and the only meaning is what we make. In Chapter 1:

What representing has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”?

It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

A very different vibe than the warm memories of *Auld Lang Syne*, right? Dr. Carol Fontaine, one of my Hebrew Bible professors in seminary, points out something really interesting about this text. Though the author is of his time and in some spots refers to women as troublesome objects, this book describes a unique relationship with God together with an explanation of the author’s process of philosophical inquiry. This text opens a door for later feminist and liberation interpretations of the Bible and different modes for understanding Biblical text by allowing unorthodox text into the cannon itself. Ecclesiastes provides a model for making meaning and the importance of personal wisdom that is important in the development of Western theology and philosophy.²

Ecclesiastes is often compared to the *Tao te Ching*, especially the part that is in Pete Seegers’ song, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, and because of passages like the one we heard today, speaking

¹ “Ecclesiastes” Carol Fontaine, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 1998, 161.

² Ibid, 163.

of how all is vapor, all is wind. The *Tao* teaches that once we think that we understand it, we do not, it is not an object that can be known. A fundamental tenant of both works is that there are unknowable forces beyond our understanding, and in the *Tao*, the point is the process, as in Chapter 23,

Open yourself to the Tao,
then trust your natural responses;
and everything will fall into place.

In Ecclesiastes:

The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

The word wind here in Hebrew is *Haruach*. Anyone know why that word might be important? *Ruach* is the moving spirit of God. It appears all over Hebrew Scripture, with the Spirit of God moving over the waters in the first lines of Genesis, and everywhere from Job to this moment in Ecclesiastes. Chapter 32 of the *Tao* ends, “All things end in the Tao, as rivers flow into the sea.” *Ruach* is more than a noun, just as the *Way* in the *Tao te Ching* is more than any words can describe.

At some times in Jewish and Christian text and tradition there has been an assumption that wealth means that one is favored by God, because blessings have been bestowed upon one’s family. There are also texts that offer the different conclusions within the Bible. Ecclesiastes is one of these, with the author writing in many different ways not to assume that a wealthy person is wise, and remember that the author is incredibly wealthy, in Chapter 9 he writes:

So I said, “Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.” The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

The author writes that in the face of mortality, things cannot bring happiness or wisdom, and that we should enjoy ourselves with food, merriment, and in our work—with being human.³

People have always struggled with making meaning and with understanding our place in and relationship to the universe. In Ecclesiastes, beautiful images such as “all streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full,” are juxtaposed with “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.” Sometimes learning more about something gives us great joy. When I finally understand how to fix something that is broken, I feel great. And it is also true that when we have greater wisdom and understanding of the scope of something, it can be disheartening, or sorrowful. A fundamental question human beings have struggled with, is, is it better to know more and perhaps be sad, or to not know and live in ignorance of a problem. In general, we have tended toward wanting more knowledge, more complication, nuance, and understanding, because with that greater knowledge comes the potential for incredible growth, change, and deeper connections among people. With greater wisdom (which isn’t always the same as knowledge), we can see our world more deeply, we have more opportunity to be amazed and uplifted by the web of life, and we have more tools to move through sorrow. The *Tao* offers:

If you open yourself to insight,
you are at one with insight

³ Ibid., 162.

and you can use it completely.
If you open yourself to loss,
you are at one with loss
and you can accept it completely.

Unitarian Universalists exist today because of the impulse to dive deep into Scripture, to talk about things like the history and context of the Bible, and to wrestle with how that shapes personal faith and the larger tradition.

So as we move into a new year, a marker that people often make in their lives as an opportunity for personal growth and learning, I invite us to consider the wisdom of the Book of Ecclesiastes and the *Tao te Ching*. How do we find the balance of letting go and diving deeper into reflection and learning? What is blocking us as we open ourselves to insight? What assumptions are we making about wisdom and power? What physical objects are we asking to help change us, to make us happy, and what internal work might do a better job at that? The *Tao* teaches that if we have a picture in our mind of what the answer is before we seek it, we will never get there. If wisdom and growth are a process, our invitation today is not to decide what this new year will bring, but to consider ways to be more open, to live fully, and to be human together.

So may it be.
Amen.