

Sermon: January 3, 2016 Ecclesiastes 3 (New Year's) and Matthew 2 (Epiphany)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

In 1980, VST Professor David Lochhead co-authored a study entitled “**Living between Memory and Hope.**” (United Church Publishing House, 1981) The content and structure of the book I have long since forgotten but that title taps me on the shoulder every now and then, reminding me of one of the great truths of my life. In so many ways and at so many levels, our life as human beings and even moreso, our life as disciples of Jesus Christ is lived in a space that sometimes seems enormous and at other times almost seems to overlap onto itself: the space between Memory and Hope.

Each time we pull down the calendar from an old year and tack up a fresh calendar for the New Year, we are reminded of this space between Memory and Hope, and the scripture lessons we have heard this morning have thing or two to say about it as well. So I'd like to spend a bit of time meandering through some of the venues in life where Memory and Hope both have their say.

When we begin our lives, we have before us 365 dates – 366 in a leap year like this one – that are unencumbered by emotional attachments. Oh, I guess we have our own birthday – and December 25th – and if you're patriotic, July 1st– and days of remembrance like September 11th and November 11th and December 6th – but for the most part, we begin life with a day just being a day. But then, within our families, we start adding special days: birthdays, first dates, memorable events, wedding anniversaries. I have a cousin who is particularly adept at keeping track of such dates - cousin Bill turned 66 yesterday, Pat and Marie have their 42nd anniversary tomorrow, we had supper at Evelyn's a year ago tonight and it was chicken breasts in white wine sauce – and my Mom was pretty adept at such record-keeping as well.

What I have noticed in recent years, is the addition of the other kinds of dates – dates of endings as well as beginnings. So each year I now recall that my Dad died on September 20th, Mom on February 24th, my brother on May 30th. February 13th was the last night I spent with my Mom, as my brother and niece and I sat with her, talking about life and listening to an old cassette recording of her playing the piano. And some days play an unfortunate double-duty, with someone's passing landing on the same date as someone else's birthday.

It may be overstating the case, but I think these commemorations of happiness and grief is a significant aspect of what makes us human. We are equipped to experience the basic emotions of mad, sad and glad, and while a healthy life probably doesn't memorialize too many events that made us angry, we do remember times that have brought us sorrow and joy. We do so because people *matter* to us, *relationships* shape our days and our lives. And so at the beginning of a new year, we give thanks for the joy that we have gained from our friendships and from our positive family connections; we anticipate a year that will have many more positive events, some of our own making, some received as gracious gifts from others; we enhance the meaning of our lives by *being involved* in the lives of others. And as we do so, we also open ourselves to pain, for in our connection with others we also make ourselves vulnerable. We take the risk of their pain becoming our pain; we invite the possibility of hurt and brokenness and sorrow. The future gives us hope, and past memories give us our foundation for meaning. And all of that is part of this gift we call life, which we embrace as individuals, as members of families, within circles of friends, and within this body which we call the Church.

As those who follow the path of Jesus, we have a deep, in-the-bones connection with this space between Memory and Hope. Jesus himself stated the paradox well in saying “the Kingdom of God is at hand” which can just as easily be translated, “the Kingdom of God is within you.” At hand – ready to happen, or nearby. Within you – already happening or potentially possible. As Christians we live with that promise all the time: that the realm of love, the process of Shalom, has already begun to unfold with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, yet the world around us shows us that this promised Kingdom certainly isn't here yet. We trust in the power of God who is present and active, we commit ourselves to consistently showing this new way of love, yet we also wait and wonder and yearn for something well beyond our control.

This notion of living between Memory and Hope is what we celebrate at Christmas and Epiphany. When we say that this Jeshua-bar-Joseph, son of Mary, raised in a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, was the Christ or Messiah, we say that this was the child of hope who answered the age-old promises for a new leader. Filled with memories of the faithfulness of Sarah and Abraham, and God's own deliverance from the

bondage of slavery, the children of Israel yearned for the new one who would bring God's own faithfulness to bear and for Christians, that one is Christ Jesus. We are drawn toward the hope, analogous to the way that the magi were drawn toward a star signifying the dawning of a new day.

From the early, early days of our faith, people have wrangled with the joys and sorrows of life, the memories and the hopes. The temptation within religion has always been to separate the world into we and they, and experiences into good and bad, with faithfulness and good fortune being pretty much synonymous. When the crop is good, when the children are healthy, it's supposedly a sign of God's favour being showered down upon the faithful.

But the writer of Ecclesiastes knew better than this, and memorably spelled it out in the 3rd chapter, which we heard this morning. Life, like the natural world around us, divides itself into seasons. Just as nature moves from seedtime to harvest, so life offers us times to break down and times to build up, times to speak and times to be silent. Rather than demonizing the tough times, looking for someone to blame or perhaps blaming unfavourable results on our own unfaithful behaviours, this writer suggests that we look at all of it as a natural process beyond our understandings of cause-and-effect. We learn from all of it, and part of what we learn is that regardless of our best efforts, there is nothing we can do to shield us from times of birth and death, sewing and tearing. And in all of it, as we seek meaning, God is there.

It would be good for us to pause a moment with this, because I know that this concept is a bit shaky for many of us. We say we have faith and that our faith helps us through the tough times, but then something shocking happens, and our deepest selves interpret it as Divine punishment OR it gets added to the file of evidence that suggests that God doesn't exist at all. We take our beliefs that God is good, that God's desire is always for health and wholeness, and assume that a good, loving God will shield us from anything harsh or unfair. It's only natural that we would make these assumptions, especially if we have made sacrifices in life that say, "I choose to follow God rather than something easier."

And it's because of that very natural tendency that, some 2300 years ago, the author of Ecclesiastes spelled it out. Life does have a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. Where we find our meaning, and where we find holiness, is not in the relative balance of good times and tough times, but in how we respond to those events.

As many of you know, back in 1999 when I was serving a congregation in North Calgary, I crashed hard with clinical depression, and did not return to Ministry for many years. In the midst of that I had LOTS of questions, and it boiled down to this: why in the world would God put me and that congregation through that? Why call me there, only to have it tumble down? Even as I landed on my feet in another, non-Church job that was new and fun and exciting, I didn't really want to hear the words of Ecclesiastes telling me about a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. I felt cheated and I wanted God to answer.

But Ecclesiastes was right. In those years following my crash I rediscovered my sense of humour, I found a balance between independence and interconnectedness, I discovered how healthy I am when I am busy and on top of things. Most of all, I gained the space to be a Dad who was deeply involved in the lives of my young children. And before long I came to understand that after an 18-year season of being a young Minister in service of Christ's Church came this 12-year season when the most important thing was being a Dad, and owning the unusual combination of gifts and foibles that go into being me. In 2012 the season changed again, and while I haven't quite figured out the label of this season, I'm awfully glad that involves being here with you. While some people's lives do have a degree of constancy and consistency, mine has had a heaping dose of Ecclesiastes, and I wouldn't change that for the world. May the seasons of your lives unfold with graciousness and delight.

As we move from 2015 to 2016, there are so many places where this motif of living between Memory and Hope comes to bear. We always need to defend ourselves about getting too attached to the memories, lest the past block us from adequately engaging the present and future, but we need to learn what history has to tell us as we move forward.

- So we look forward to our ongoing walk of reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters, on whose land we gather. We have learned much, as summarized by the TRC report of 2015, but the walk of mutual hope has barely begun.

- We turn to our governments and our own power as consumers, to take seriously the climate-based agreements forged in Paris. We look at the environmental costs of hundreds of years of industrialization, we face up to our reliance on electronics and personal travel, and we seek God's own wisdom to a sustainable future.
- We begin an anniversary year, celebrating the vibrancy of Christ's own life as this congregation marks 125 years of worship in this very building. We seek the wisdom of our history as we engage the spiritual realities and community needs of today.

In all of this, we remember, and we anticipate – we live between memory and hope.

As a sign of that space, today's message ends with a video** that weaves together some images of the year just past and the words of Ecclesiastes. May 2016 be a year of faithfulness and joy for each of you. Amen.

References:

**For a wonderful video version of Ecclesiastes 3, Niemietz, Sarah and W.G. Snuffy Walden, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-ji4TkElt4>

For a classic Christian commentary (ca. 1700 AD), Henry, Matthew. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ec.iv.html>

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Plus PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE for January 3, 2016 (GW)

On this day, God of the ages, we come to you seeking your illumination for our lives. Each of us have places in our lives that are in desperate need of the clear light of day. Whether it is old hurts, continuing grudges, or pockets of shame that we carry with us, we open those secluded places to you now in silent confession...shine your light into our lives, Holy One. As we begin a new year, be our beacon, be our clarity.

Ready us, O God, to be moved by you. Where needed, change us: open our thoughts and attitudes to your new ideas. Help us to notice people and situations that have previously been invisible to us, or regarded as "somebody else's concern." Challenge us where we are complacent, enliven us where we need a boost, confront us where we are hard-hearted, tend to us where we are hurting. Engage us in life, author of life.

Hear us, source of blessings, as we name to you our hopes and fears for the world.... As we add our commitment to your way of Shalom... as we name those who need your love, tender and powerful in their lives... as we pray for this community of faith, as we begin this special anniversary year....

We have much to bring to this journey – all that which has brought us to this point in our lives, plus all that we know about life and the world, all the expertise we have. You know this... and you know how it equips us to engage life in your name. Bring forth the best we have to offer, O God, for the benefit of all.

All these things we pray in the name of Jesus – our Messiah, our brother, our light. Amen.