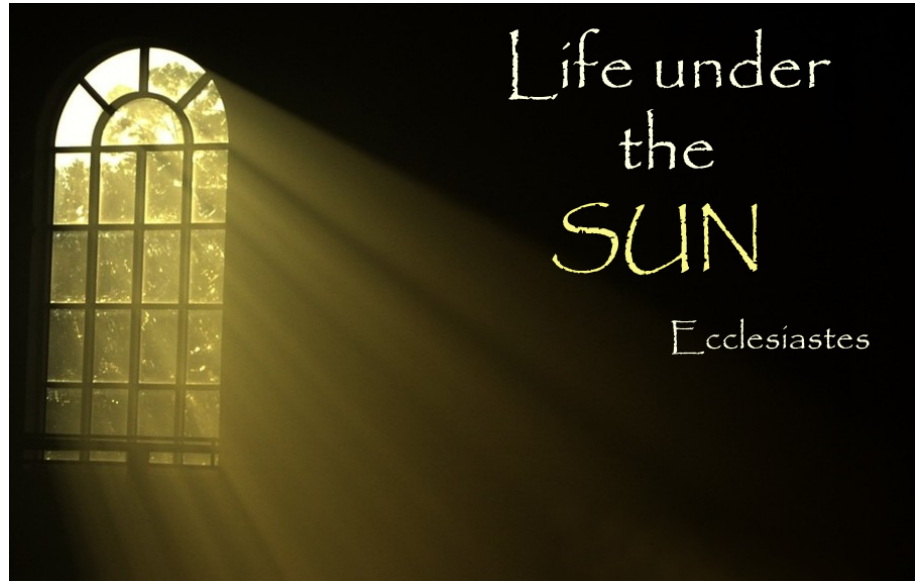


15 November 2020  
Ecclesiastes 3:9-15;  
Ecclesiastes 12:9-14  
Practice the basics of  
faith  
First Mennonite Church



The end of the matter,” says verse 13, and the book of Ecclesiastes comes to a close. As a good teacher, the final editor of the

book now summarizes all 12 chapters in one pithy phrase: *“Fear God, and keep God’s commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”*

*“Fear God, and keep God’s commandments.”* This is what we are supposed to take away after reading all 13 chapters. The final editor of the book cuts to the chase, boils down the entire book into 6 words. *“Fear God, and keep God’s commandments.”*

Back in late September I participated in MCCS’s AGM, which was held online. It was a three-hour meeting where we listened to various speakers talk about how MCC had used its donations to further the work of God’s Reign of peace and justice here on earth. Several days after the meeting someone asked me how the meeting had gone. Rather than repeat everything that had been said over the course of three hours, I summarized the discussion in the following way: Everyone, from the refugee coordinator to the accountant, from Indigenous neighbours to the Thrift Stores—everyone talked about what they were doing before Covid-19 and how Covid-19 had completely upended everything, and how they had to adjust in light of the pandemic. That was my take-away of that 3-hour MCC meeting. It’s not as concise as Ecclesiastes 6-word summary, but it’s all I got!

*“Fear God, and keep God’s commandments.”* This morning, I want to unpack this pithy sentence, especially the phrase “fear God.”



Now, when I think of fear, I immediately think of it negatively. Fear is an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or is a threat. It's like,

- Suddenly waking up at night drenched in sweat, heart pumping, breathing heavily

because you were running away from a crowd seeking to do you harm.

- Or it's like the feeling you have when you are walking alone at night in a part of the city deemed unsafe.

In the Bible, Jacob was afraid of the avenging Esau after he and his mum cheated Esau out of his birthright (Genesis 32:7). The Hebrews were dismayed by the strength of the Canaanites just as they were set to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:9). Job was tortured by physical and mental pains which defied explanation and feared he would die prematurely (Job 3:25). Joseph was afraid to return to Judea when he heard that Archelaus ruled there in the place of Herod (Matthew 2:22).

We all have fear. Fear is a protective mechanism that God has placed within us to alert us when there's a threat so that we can act and protect ourselves from that threat.



This is **not** the kind of fear Ecclesiastes is talking about, however.

The Bible talks about a second kind of fear which happens when God encounters us, when God reveals God's presence to us. For instance, when Abraham met God, the first thing God said was, "*Do not be afraid, Abram*" (Genesis 15:1). When Zechariah the priest was in the temple, he

encountered an angel of the Lord. When Zechariah saw the angel, *“he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah...’*” These same words were uttered by the angel Gabriel in an encounter with Mary, the mother of Jesus. The angel said to her, *“Do not be afraid, Mary...”* In the gospel of Mark, three women went to the tomb that early morning. When they got there, they saw an empty tomb and met a young man dressed in a white robe. This person said to the women, *do not be alarmed*”, and then told them of Jesus’ resurrection. How did the women respond to this Good News? *“...they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”* (Mark 16:8).

The really strange thing about this kind of fear—and it’s hard to describe—is that intimately connected to it, are feelings of amazement, awe, profound wonder, reverence, and ironically, intense attraction.

For example, Jacob is seized by terror when he has a vision of the heavenly ladder, but then says, *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”* Jacob had both this sense of fear at encountering this mysterious and powerful being, yet was drawn to it because it was calling him to go in a direction that would fulfill the promises given to Abraham and Sarah, that through them all the world would be blessed (Genesis 28:13-17).

Many years ago, Kathi and I travelled through parts of Europe. While we were in Paris, we had the opportunity to visit the Notre-Dame Cathedral, considered by many to be one of the finest examples of



French Gothic architecture. I fell in love with that building. I remember sitting on

a bench in front of the church for a long time just looking and studying the façade. It was magnificent. Walking inside and sitting in a pew was, for me, very moving. The Gothic architecture was awe-inspiring. I was awed by how the skeletal stone ribs, pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses created this soaring vertical interior. I felt so small, so insignificant in this towering and holy space. Yet, at the same time I felt that this was a place of reverence, mystery, that I was actually in the presence of holy God.

Have you ever had such a fearful experience? Some have had such an experience after listening to incredible pieces of music like Handel's Messiah.

Moses stumbling upon the burning bush is another example of this kind of fear.

On the one hand, Moses is afraid to look upon God, but on the other hand is



overwhelmed with awe and wonder that this holy being who refuses to be named is actually calling him, someone who is terrified of speaking in public, to go to Pharaoh with the message, "let my people go!"



We can see such fear being played out in the Easter story as well. First, the witnesses to the tomb are encountered by God's presence which terrifies them. They run away and lock themselves in a room, but then they are transformed by their encounter with this incredibly powerful Spirit who is not bound by human limitations, a being who is more powerful than even death. And this experience transforms them into hope-filled, inspired apostles who are willing to serve this God with their lives and to have their lives be shaped by this God.

This is the last sermon in this series on Ecclesiastes. In the previous two sermons I highlighted the **two main themes** in the book. The first theme was the Hebrew word, *hebel*. In Ecclesiastes it's translated as vanity in most bible translations. In my research, I found *hebel* can also be translated as **vapour, mist, or breath**—something which is real, yet is hard to get your hands on; it comes and goes and doesn't last long. It's transitory, fleeting, and short-lived. Like when you go outside in the cold and breathe out, you can see your breath for an instant, but then suddenly it's gone. Like the mist that is coming out of the vapourizer—it's there but suddenly disappears. This is *hebel*.

The **second theme**, is closely related to *hebel*, and is constantly lurking in the background of Ecclesiastes. Everything on the earth is **vapour because it is short-lived**. All life is terminal. At some point in time, we will all die.

In chapter 3, the author encourages us to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live, and that it's God's gift that all *should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil*. The reason why we should do these things is not just because they are fun or enjoyable, even though they are. Ecclesiastes encourages us to do these things precisely because of who we are and who God is. Human beings, as the writer points out in 3:14, *should stand in awe before God.*"

Awe is like that experience I had at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Awe is what Jacob experienced in his vision of the ladder; what Moses experienced at the burning bush. This awe, this reverence, this "fear of God" is founded upon an acute awareness that we are limited and finite creatures, whereas God is infinite

and Wholly Other. We are like mist that appears for a short time and then disappears while God is from everlasting to everlasting.

*As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
they flourish like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more* (Psalm 105:15-16) is how the Psalmist describes the human condition.

So, during the brief time we are allotted here on earth, Ecclesiastes encourages us to live our lives fully, enjoy the life we have...because it's not going to last. Everything is hebel, it's mist, vapour. We are here one day, and then—poof—the next day we are gone.

*Fear God, and keep God's commandments.* It's like living each day, taking each breath, each step, as if it all was a gift. Fearing God is like coming to terms with who we are and who God is. **When we fully reckon with our humanness, then we will be able to live in such a way that focusses on values and ends that are of lasting worth.**

This has all sorts of implications. For instance, fearing God means focussing on values and ends that have lasting worth, things like building relationships that count, rather than gaining possessions to leave behind. It means acting out of love, not greed. It means giving out of compassion, not out of compulsion. It means serving rather than ruling.

Years ago, I got to know an old woman by the name of Martha. In many ways, she modelled the kind of fear in God, the awe and reverence of God that I see in Ecclesiastes.

One-way Martha feared God was to build relationships that counted. I remember one-time visiting her. I should first tell you that she was a bell collector. She had all shapes and sizes of bells, bells from all over the world, bells given to her as gifts from many different people who had travelled to different parts of the world. She had bells in her dining room and bells in her living room. We began talking her vast collection of bells. She took one off the shelf, and turned it over to look on the inside. She had written the name of the family member who gave her that particular bell on masking tape and had stuck it on the inside of the bell as a way for her to remember who had given it to her. She then read out the

name of the person, and then proceeded to talk about that person. I found this so interesting. I thought we were talking about bells, but she wasn't all that interested in telling me about the bell. Rather, she was more interested in talking about **the person** who had given her the bell. The bell was a vehicle to get to at the most important thing in her mind, which was **the person**. She told me a bit about that person who had given her the bell, what they were doing, and then pointed to one of the pictures, so that I would know who she was talking about.

Fascinating! Through the bells and the pictures, I gained some insight into how important relationships were for Martha. I sensed that building and maintaining relationships with her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren were very important to her.

*"Fear God and keep God's commandments"* It has to do with focussing on lasting values like building relationships that count.

The **second way** Martha feared God was to **serve others**. While there are many ways to do this, Martha's way was through hospitality. One time I visited Martha late in the afternoon. When I got to her home, I was surprised that the table was set for two. We talked for a while, and then she insisted we have some fasma. You know, there is a period of time before supper, that if you eat during this time, your appetite for supper will not be there. This was one of those times, but there was no way I could leave without first having a bun and some cookies.

That was Martha. She had been shaped, transformed by the fear of God. Here's another way of saying it: she was a person who had encountered Christ, and had allowed Christ to shape and mold her to be more Christ-like. She was a person who saw her Christian witness to include building lasting relationships and practicing hospitality.

*"Fear God, and keep God's commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone."*

The mist continues to come out of the humidifier. You can see it, but after a few seconds it disappears. It's so fleeting, transitory, and insubstantial. At the end of the day, our lives are fragile and transitory. Knowing that we are limited and finite can make a difference in the way we live each day. Because the time of our lives does not go on forever, we can learn to treasure the time being, to live today in gratitude for the time that God has allotted us.

We've come to the end of this sermon series. If you're looking for one takeaway for all three sermons, here it is:

*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. (Ecclesiastes 12: 13)*

Amen