

Location, Location, Location

Ecclesiastes 9:7-12

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This is another one of those sermons where I'm going to have to ask for your patience at the outset.

It might not be obvious where I'm going or how I'm going to get there or how the threads all connect or what they have to do with this week's question...

But all shall become clear. At least this is the plan.

From 2005-11, our family lived on the west coast. Three years were spent in Vancouver while I did graduate studies at Regent College. This was followed up by another three years serving as a pastor in Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island.

These were six good years. We learned a lot, had some unique experiences, met some great people, and enjoyed a beautiful little corner of God's creation.

Many people complain about the grey, rainy days of the west coast winter, but honestly, I didn't mind it. Growing up on a farm, rain was always welcome.

I loved it that I could pedal my bike to school in January. If I wanted to. Which I rarely did. But still, I *could* have.

Occasionally, in my wandering or cycling around town, I would encounter a real-estate sign. Some of the houses would be beautiful mansions in perfectly manicured yards, but there would be more "ordinary" sized homes. Sometimes I would go home and google the prices of these houses.

Usually, the number was a staggering figure, one that I could barely believe. In Vancouver, the number could be easily five to ten times the value of a similar sized home in southern Alberta.

The reason is no mystery, of course. You can probably guess it by the title of my sermon today.

Location, location, location.

Any realtor will tell you that location is everything. Looking out at the Pacific Ocean is, apparently, more desirable to more people than looking out at a wheat field.

And it will cost you five to ten times more for the former than the latter. Location is everything.

Location doesn't just matter when it comes to the world of real estate.

Location also affects how we read and how we hear our bibles.

As you may know, I started doing a bit of chaplaincy work out at the jail in November. This usually involves me leading two bible studies each Monday afternoon with the guys from the remand unit.

Since I started doing this my ears are uniquely tuned to stories from others in similar positions.

One of these stories comes from Richard Beck, a guy who I quote from time to time. He's an author and professor of psychology from Abilene Christian University in Texas.

As it happens, he, too, spends some time leading bible studies in prison each week. I was fascinated to read what he wrote about his experience in a blog post this week. It's worth hearing in its entirety:

When I started leading the Bible study out at the prison I was in a season of deconstruction. Doubt and questioning were the engine of my spiritual life. Lament was what I was most interested in, the desolations of feeling abandoned by God.

So, when I first went out to the prison, one of my very first studies was going to be about the lament psalms. I was going to share with the inmates Walter

Brueggemann's contrast between psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation, but leaning heavily into the psalms of disorientation.

I made this decision because I felt that the prisoners would relate to lament, given their hard and dark circumstances. If anyone should feel God-abandoned, I assumed, surely it would be the incarcerated! Let me, then, help give voice to their lament. I thought this was a winning plan.

It didn't go so well.

About midway through my lesson on the lament psalms, really leaning into their despair, the men in the study started to grow restless and frustrated. Seeing this, I stopped. "What's going on?" I asked.

"Well," they responded, "We get it. We know. Prison is a really dark place. We don't need to be reminded of that."

"Okay," I said, "Then if lament isn't what you need to hear, what do you need?"

"Hope," they shared. "We need some hope."

This seems blindingly obvious to me now. And in my spiritual biography this exchange was the critical turning point in my season of deconstruction, the hinge moment when I began my season of reconstruction.

Starting that night out at the prison, I began to preach about hope. Given where I was at the time—I was an angsty progressive Christian—this wasn't easy. But I grew into it. Men in a very hopeless place taught me to hope. For that, I am eternally grateful.

Location, location, location.

Hope and lament are contextual. In privileged spaces, lament is all the rage. If I were to write on this blog, "we need more lament in the church" I'd get a chorus of Amens from you. And the reason for that is contextual.

When a privileged church leans too far into praise, that can be obscene and inappropriate. The winners are praising God for being the winners. Lament among privileged people is good medicine as it forces us to attend to those

parts of the world where people aren't winning, where life is broken and painful. In spaces of power, peace, wholeness, and affluence, lament seasons our praise, making it more truthful and honest, keeping us close to where the bleeding is happening in the world.

In short, lament helps a privileged church resist becoming triumphalistic. Lament makes sense in that social location.

But out at the prison, and among the poor, I've learned that hope is the more needed message. In these locations lament is already there and baked in. Despair doesn't need any more attention. Despair is the temptation. What is needed is a move from desolation to hope.

So, what do you need to hear? Do I need to draw your attention to the brokenness of the world? Or do you need, as you sit in the ashes, a message of hope?

Location, location, location.¹

Yes, I stole my sermon title from Richard Beck. 😊

I have had virtually identical experiences in the jail. In the days before the pandemic when I would volunteer at the jail, I would go in with wonderfully nuanced interpretations of difficult passages, thinking that I was going to help them by creating a space for doubt or grief, thinking that would give them freedom to move beyond a severe and judgmental understanding of God.

Very often, what I got were blank stares. They didn't have nearly the problems with severity and judgment that I did. These things made sense to them. What they wanted was to talk about spiritual warfare and overcoming the devil and his temptations.

This was a jolt for me. A necessary one. I learned that I had not understood their location very well. I had assumed that my location was the default one.

¹ https://richardbeck.substack.com/p/reading-the-bible-with-the-damned-e48?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=355868&post_id=97467156&isFreemail=true&utm_medium=email

This week's faith question is, in a sense, all about location.

It's a cliché that good preaching is supposed to "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." But after the past few years, I find myself wanting to just be comfortable, to settle in, to let things be normal and not unusually hard.

Can this be reconciled with a Gospel that calls us to hard places, and a God whom we meet in our distress? How do we know when our "sabbath season" turns into complaisance and indifference?

I have heard this cliché and I understand the truth that it points to. It is a different (shorter) way of expressing what Richard Beck (and I) learned at the jail.

Context matters. To those whose location is one of comfort, a bit (or a lot) of prodding might be required; to those whose location is one of affliction, a word of comfort is needed.

And I do believe that the message of Jesus offers both. Jesus annoyed and unsettled those in positions of social privilege and influence and wealth. He afflicted the comfortable with the news of an upside-down kingdom that required them to adopt a new way of seeing and living.

Those on the bottom saw in Jesus a message of comfort and hope. He comforted the afflicted. The beatitudes are perhaps the clearest example of this—blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the persecuted, etc.

At the same time, when I hear this expression, my first thought is, "Well, I'm not sure those are our only two choices. Do all of us inhabit only one of those two categories?"

Either we're the comfortable who need to be afflicted *or* we're the afflicted who need to be comforted? Is there nothing in between?

And what about the fact that we might inhabit a different location at different points in our story? Or in the broader stories that we are a part of?

The question referenced "the past few years." The pandemic was a global phenomenon that was deeply unsettling and disorienting for many people. We're still living with the effects it has had upon us, whether it's in terms of public health, or a

hyper-polarized political culture, or the breakdown of trust in institutions and authorities, or general anxiety about the future.

I think it's quite natural to long for "normal" and for "comfortable" and "predictable" at this point in proceedings.

After the past few years, I find myself more drawn to passages like the opening few verses of our reading from Ecclesiastes this morning than some of the more demanding teaching of Jesus.

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸ Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. ⁹ Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun.

Now, it must be acknowledged that this is an odd passage (I heard that from a few people involved in this week's service!). The teacher from Ecclesiastes seems a bit conflicted and confused.

This is vision of a life that I would say most of us long for—the gladness of food and wine, joyful hearts, enjoying the lives we've been given under approval of God.

But it is tinged with these awkward references to the meaninglessness of life. How can a book of the bible say that life is meaningless? Would not the approval of God *itself* lend meaning to these things?

Well, the Teacher is a something of a philosopher (not that I have anything against philosophers! I majored in philosophy at university!).

He looks out at the world and wants to understand. He pursues everything imaginable—wealth, sex, power, wisdom—and comes to the conclusion that it's all vanity.

Bad things happen to good people, good things happen to bad people, time and chance happen to all people. Everything is temporary and fleeing. Nothing good lasts.

So, make the best of it. Grab whatever happiness and comfort you can while you can. Do some good along the way.

This is the default position of many in our world. This is a rational conclusion if you believe that human reason and experience tell the whole story.

But human wisdom will only get so far. There is only so much you can learn about the world through reason and experience.

(The Teacher probably should have known better as a member of the people of Israel!)

To quote the American writer Walker Percy, meaning and help must come from the outside.

And it has. First, with the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And then, decisively with Jesus of Nazareth.

The ground zero truth of the Christian message is that God himself changed locations, swapping divinity for humanity, giving us a vision of the kingdom, dying so that we might have forgiveness and new life.

So, to be perfectly frank, the Teacher is wrong. Our days are *not* meaningless. At least not if Jesus is to be believed.

Jesus sets us within the broader context of a hopeful story where the comfortable *do* owe the afflicted something and where the afflicted *do* have good reason to hope for better.

It is a story where we all belong to one other and to God.

Jesus changes the game. He shows us that the abundant life that we all long for is not incompatible with following him into the hard places.

He shows us that even our failures and our suffering and our uncertainty can have profound meaning.

And he promises us rest. Matthew 11:28-30:

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in

heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

The call of Jesus is indeed a call to the reorder priorities, to seek peace, to pursue justice, to align with those the world considers unlovely and unloveable.

But the call of the gospel is not one more burden to pile upon already burdened people. It is not a summons to be relentlessly angry at everything that is wrong with the world and to be constantly exhorting ourselves and others to “do the work.” The Christian life is not just relentless striving.

Jesus himself says that his “yoke is easy, and his burden is light.” He is gentle and humble. He offers us rest.

Jesus does not say, like the Teacher, “Just take it easy, enjoy what you can in your meaningless life.”

He says, “Your life is charged full of meaning. So, love and serve and work and heal and pray and believe and hope into the kingdom that is coming...”

And also. Lay down your burdens. And rest. And reflect. And enjoy the gifts and the relationships you have been given to enjoy and to tend.

He says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

God knows our location. God knows if we are, like Richard Beck, in a season of deconstruction or if we’re like the inmates and in a season of desolation or, more likely, somewhere in between.

God knows what we need to hear and when we need to hear it.

And so ultimately, we must trust.

We must trust that God will let us know when we are growing complacent and need to be jolted into a more appropriate care and concern for the afflicted.

We must trust that God will let us know when we are carrying too many burdens and need to rest.

And we must trust that God is not opposed to human happiness—that God knows that in this world of endless need, in this world of persistent injustice and the absence of lasting *shalom*, in this world where “the work” is never done...

We will all have seasons where we simply need to *be*. To take pleasure in the simple joys and comforts and relationships of an ordinary life, trusting that God is indeed working out his plan of salvation for the whole world.

Our locations may change throughout our lives. But God does not.

God is alive and active and speaking and calling to us at all times with the message of hope that we need to hear.

Amen.

