

“Giving Up All Hope for a Better Yesterday”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

(Reflections upon a time for almost everything)

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[Ask for a couple words from people that express what happened memorable in 2011 for them, taking “mic” around.]

2012 is only 10 ½ hours old.

What an opportunity to consider together in worship *how* we enter this new year and *how* to put last year into perspective.

2011 has meant unique experiences for each of us. Some of us have gone to the hospital with pain and illness, returned home, then recovered to much better health—we’re grateful, though left with a few scars.

Some of us started new businesses.

Some of us became engaged. Some of us married.

Some of us retired. Some of us started new jobs, even new professions.

Some of us left relationships or experienced loss in relationships through mutual choice, divorce, or death.

Some of us learned huge lessons of life. Some of us barely reflected upon the lessons life may be giving us—we’re too busy living.

Some of us gave birth, or await births very soon.

Some of us graduated from schools. Some of us started a new type of education.

These are all unique experiences, though it is surprising how many of these rather large events we can hold within a year. *One of the blessings of a community of faith is the frequent awareness of many of life’s potential events—so that our own experiences are easier to put into perspective.*

This week-end we hear about the “Best of . . .” and the “Worst of . . .” 2011, on the national scene, at an international level, for sports, fashion, music, books, and movies.

We each have private reflections at our interior altars, with God, reviewing our bests and worst’s of the year. We make subtle decisions about how to consider our past, how to live today, and how to lean into the future.

Poets, philosophers, teachers, leaders in religion, and song writers capture the diverse experiences of humanity as they look back, and forward.

I’m fond of the singing and lyrics of Charles Aznavoir, who is the Frank Sinatra of the French speaking world. I’m fond of his singing in part because he has a meaningful way of naming human experience.

Those of you who are ten years old may think of “yesterday” as the day you made your first soccer goal, or the day you flubbed the goal. When we get older, we think of “yesterday” as a time when we were younger. Aznavour sings: [Words are on screen.]

“Yesterday when I was young, the taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue. I teased at life as if it were a foolish game, the way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame. . .

I ran so fast that youth and time at last ran out. I never stopped to think what life was all about, and every conversation I can recall concerned itself with me, and nothing else at all. . .

There are so many songs in me that won't be sung. I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue. The time has come to pay for yesterday, when I was young. . ."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we look back and remember when “the taste of life was sweet as rain upon our tongue,” but we can at the very same time recall feeling “the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue.” Sweetness and bitterness—our tongues can taste both; *our souls as well as our tongues have tasted this spectrum.*

Sometimes when we look back, our experience is more like Frank Sinatra's song, “It was a very good year.” We reminisce when we were 21, “that was a very good year.” When I was 32, “that was a very good year.” In retrospect, each year was “a very good year.”

Funny thing about life, and our stopping to reflect: We can sing a couple songs and identify with all of them. We might declare with Sinatra, that for us 2011 was “A Very Good Year,” yet we can agree, too, with Aznavoir that it brought some “bitter tastes of tears upon our tongues.”

One of my favorite definitions of “**forgiveness**” is the title of this sermon: **“Giving Up All Hope for a Better Yesterday.”**

We cannot change *what* has happened, but we surely can change *how* we look back at what happened. We can look back angrily, compassionately, with whimsy, or forgivingly. *Our present is drastically altered by how we put into perspective our past.*

Qohelet, the narrator of *Ecclesiastes*, names 28 experiences common to us humans. They are listed as 14 pairs, in no particular order. Though all the experiences are common, only two are certain for each of us—birth and death. The rest of the experiences involve some degree of human choice. A time to plant and harvest, a time to weep and to laugh, a time to mourn and to dance, a time to keep and a time to give to a rummage sale—no, to throw away, a time to keep silence and a time to speak . . .

Qohelet, the teacher, the one who gathers people together for an assembly, raised some tough life questions. *Where do we find meaning in life?*

Qohelet's argument are structured something like a mobile or a wind chime. He presents ideas here and there, all hanging upon a center. In most of our bibles, we read that everything “under the sun” is “vanity.”<sup>2</sup> But vanity is a bad translation that really changed the original meaning. The original term meant “a puff of air,” or “breath.”<sup>3</sup> The scripture should read: “All life is a puff of air,” that is, brief, here on earth, under the sun. Weeping is brief; so is laughter. Silence is brief; so are times to speak. Life itself is rather brief, here on earth.

Qohelet observes what many song-writers name. Life goes by fast.

Aznavoir sings, in agreement with *Ecclesiastes*, that life goes by like a puff of air: [Words are on screen.]

“I see so many things at last but didn't see the time go by  
I've known delight; I've known disaster, the caviar the humble pie  
From the absurd to the sublime, I didn't see the time go by.”<sup>4</sup>

“What *is* good for humankind to do?” Qohelet asks.

Qohelet, the compiler of Ecclesiastes, was an interesting guy. He had done some life experiments. An author recently wrote a book entitled *Nickel and Dime*; she experimented with living on minimum wage in a few different cities. Qohelet did the opposite; he experimented with a yuppy life style. He worked excessively hard to build up a big inheritance and to have many things. Then, once having achieved the lifestyle of the rich and the famous, he told his audience, who would have been mostly middle or upper middle class, that he realized that the things he had worked for didn’t bring him satisfaction. As a workaholic and a conspicuous consumer, he offered advice to others like him.

He did not know whether those who would receive his inheritance would use it wisely or even enjoy it. He came to believe that work and wisdom were important, but that they were important of themselves, for the joy and meaning they brought him in the doing itself. He was not against hard work; he just reconsidered the reason for working.

He came to conclude that we should enjoy our work *while we are still alive*. God gives us food, drink, and work—these are gifts for us here and now. Accept them.

His message is based on a theology. He believed that God has timing we cannot know. He seemed to infer that God’s timing is good. **We are wisest to give up trying to make sense of the timing and trust God with it. Let go. Let God do the timing. Enjoy as best we can the times, the seasons, realistically, while we are living “under heaven,” that is, on earth.**

**And, to enjoy what is, to trust God with the timing, we might need to let some things go.**

I recall hearing this song a number of times before I truly grasped the words, and then when I did, I was easily brought to tears. Song-writer John Bucchino writes of letting go in a powerful way: [Words are on screen.]

“ . . . *I’ve learned to let things go.* ’

A letter to my father holds  
A lifetime’s worth of rage  
Yet even as I sign I know  
I’ll never send this page  
*By years we’re worn to tolerance*  
*Through tears we’re forced to grow*  
With halting pace I reached this place-  
I’ve learned to let things go

Some danger, though, in letting go too early  
As much or more in letting go too late . . .

Yes, in my wisdom or...defeat  
I’ve learned to let things go.”<sup>5</sup>

Strangely enough, the past is most valuable to us when we are willing to let some dimensions of it go. This frees us to *use* the past, to learn from it, to treasure it or regret it,

but to move forward. **The ancient compiler of Ecclesiastes and contemporary philosophical song-writers have similar advice for us: Enjoy as best we can our present, the seasons, realistically, while we are living. And, to enjoy what is, to trust God with the timing, we might need to let some things go.**

Many things that have happened in the past we cherish and recall with fondness, over and over. Those things nourish us today. However, if something happened in the past that weighs us down still, we can change our perspective on it. Something that hurt us, we can re-feel over and over again, with slightly more tolerance, a little bit more empathy, a little letting-go of intensity, until it no longer holds us back, but rather, along with the good memories, it helps to springboard us forward.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Aznavour, "Yesterday When I Was Young," *Charles Aznavour Greatest Golden Hits* CD Angel Records, New York, NY, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Farmer, *Journey Through the Bible: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Volume 6, Cokesbury, 1995, 88-93.

<sup>3</sup> In this book with 12 short chapters the word "hebel" occurs 38 times and "under the sun" 29 times

<sup>4</sup> Aznavoir, op. cit., "I Didn't See the Time Go By."

<sup>5</sup> John Bucchino, words and music by Bucchino "I've Learned to Let Things Go," 2002 Art Food Music (ASCAP), Administered by Williamson Music Co. Sung by Chris; piano John on Holy Near and Chris CD.

<sup>6</sup> "The times we've known"

the times we've known are slipping by  
like vapor trails across the sky  
the best of times, the worst of times have come and gone  
the years of debt the years of doubt  
the years of what's it all about  
of holding fast and holding out and holding on  
when life was hard and chances due still I was rich just having you . . .

sometimes the years were lush and green  
sometimes we lived on hope alone  
a little bit of both have been the times we've known  
some lucky things some rotten breaks some funny things a few mistakes

the dreams that every dreamer takes and makes his own  
a time to laugh a time to cry a time to let the world go by  
and if there were some tears to pay  
no one can take those years away

our fragile days our days o (?)  
our days have grown till we have things to call our own  
the times we've known  
the times we've known  
the times we've known