

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8  
GOD'S PLACE, GOD'S PLAN?

You have a story! It is your story. It is a unique story and it is yours! It is a story that has lots of different parts to it: it is a family story – parents, siblings, spouse, children; it is a story about other relationships with friends, people you worked with, played sport with; it is a story with achievements – at school, college, or work, things that you have done, raising children, driving a 40-ton truck in war, flying fast jets, success at work; it is a story with lots of happy memories and moments, with photo albums full of these moments and we look back and smile. This is your story and nobody can take it away from you. But it is a story that is not always straightforward: the story will have disappointments, hopes and aspirations that didn't come true; work projects that failed, job interviews lost, relationships broken or damaged, days when you're frustrated by life; there are days, too, when the story runs out of control, and you are not in charge of that story, you can't control what happens and when, and that leaves you frightened. It is still your story. You may not think that your story is worth much, or that you have achieved anything, but every story is unique, and it is your story and it is worth more than money can buy. It is a story that is still being written.

Our story intertwines with other people's stories. Two people get married and their stories become intertwined in most intimate ways; they still have two stories, but there are so many intertwined moments to share. Parents and children share so much of the same story and the trauma comes when the children have to learn to write their own story for themselves; but you don't stop being connected! The church is a place where our stories intertwine with others: my story became connected with many of you in August 2000 when I became the minister of Juniper Green Church and those of you who have come to be part of our church family since then have your stories connected with mine as well as with the stories of everyone else in the room, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. We are strangers who become family together as our stories connect and we get to know others and find out these fascinating stories; sadly, we don't do that as much as we should.

Where does God fit into our story? This week, there are 7 days, 168 hours, 10,080 minutes, 604,800 seconds. For each of these seconds, God is with us; for how many of these moments are we aware that God has a place in our lives? Or is Sunday the only day on which we think about God? Our story is intertwined with God's story and our task today is to find out how that works and how we find value in that! The book of Ecclesiastes is an evangelistic tract in which the Preacher sets out to show that life without God is futile and empty, and that only the life that is centred on God and with faith has grasped the meaning of things. "Everything is meaningless" is the headline; wisdom, pleasures, work, promotion, wealth – all of these are meaningless and the whole thing could sound as if this is a counsel of despair; there is no hope anywhere. You need to get to the end of the book because there, in the last few verses, the Preacher comes to his conclusion: "*Now all...*" (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*) Life only makes sense when God is at its heart. The story is only complete when God is involved.

We read these quite unique verses from Ecclesiastes 3: "*there is a time...*" (*Ecclesiastes 3:1*) and then the preacher details 28 different human activities that make up life. Some of these we choose to do and enjoy doing and are great things to do; others we don't choose and would never choose, if we had our way, but they are part of human life and as such are part of this pattern. We don't choose the time to be born or the time to die, but these are the two great realities of human life; we know that killing is wrong, but we have seen some of that often in the last few weeks, that it too is part of the world in which we live; war equally is something that some chase for whatever reason, while Jesus encourages us to seek and make peace. We read these verses and part of us is delighted by some of it and part of us is scared by some of it because we are no longer in control of our story. We've been telling the stories of World War 1 people on our war memorials: these fascinating individual stories are shaped by the story of war, not as something they chose, but it became part of their life and of the life of

millions of others across the world, and there are some heroic stories. These 28 activities shape our stories in one way or another.

One of the books on Ecclesiastes writes about the “gentle ebb and flow of time” pictured here, a rhythm of things that moves from one activity to another and life is like that so often; we love to dance and sing, but we know there are also times to weep and mourn. Life has that rhythm to it. But we need to take it further: there is an “unfolding pattern, scintillating and God-given” – there are times when God is writing our story and there is a pattern to that story which we don’t always see. If you go to visit Holyrood Palace, you will see on the walls some large and very old tapestries; you can look at them close-up, (but not touch!) and see the intricate pattern of the stitches and marvel at the beauty of the hand craft that has gone into creating these masterpieces; but then you need to step back to see the big picture, but you might not be able to get far enough back to see the whole picture; we see the intricate detail of our lives, but not often, if at all, do we see the whole pattern of our lives; somehow it is too big for us to see and grasp all of it; God is at work in our story in ways that we don’t always grasp!

“Without God, life is a roundabout going nowhere. With God, life has a rhythm and you form part of this tapestry of time.” (Colin Sinclair) The Preacher’s theme in Ecclesiastes is that our story and God’s story are intertwined and we need to learn to trust God and be the kind of people He wants us to be. *“Now all...” (Ecclesiastes 12:13)* This is the heart of the story; this is what makes us truly human; this is what makes us rich, to trust God and allow God to be part of our story. When the Bible speaks about “Fear God” it never means that God is someone of whom we should be afraid; it speaks, rather, of respect, love, reverence, trust, that God is to be given His place as the One we trust. Trust is something we don’t always find easy, but that’s what we are challenged to do with God and this trust shapes life in most precious ways!

God’s story intertwines with our story. It happens first in the promise that God has made through the whole Bible story to people of faith, that He will be with us always and everywhere; we need to learn to see how true that it. It happens secondly when Jesus came into the world: in Jesus’s coming, the eternal God came to live in our world in human flesh and blood. Jesus shared our world for a time and so God’s story is totally connected to the story of every one of us by virtue of His being human as we are. The world in which Jesus lived was no different from the world in which we live: it is a world where people were born and died, a world where things were torn down and others were built; a world where people wept and laughed, mourned and danced; a world where people lived in fear and in oppression; a world where people loved and cared and embraced; a world where there was war and people sought peace. Because of Jesus, His birth, death and resurrection, God’s story is totally intertwined with our story; may we have the eyes to see that!

God is still at work in our stories. God hasn’t gone away – it may seem like it at times, when we look at the world and when we look at our lives, that God has gone away, but He has not. He is still with us; He is still at work in our lives and still promises to be with us always and everywhere. So when there are things that make us afraid, He is still telling us *“Do not be afraid; I am with you”*. God is still at work in the church, making us a family out of a collection of strangers and He is building His church, strengthening us in our faith, challenging us to be people who live out that faith. God’s Spirit is still inspiring people to worship and to follow Jesus; He is still opening people’s eyes to the deep realities of life and is drawing people to faith. God is still at work in the world, by seemingly little deeds done by ordinary people, yet the world is changed by these. God is at work in the world when people tell someone else the story of Jesus, or when someone shows kindness and generosity to another human being. God is still at work in our stories; they are not yet finished; we are still an unfinished book.

The challenge for us is to find, renew or deepen our sense of God. So many things get in the way of that sense: wealth was one that Jesus saw more than any other as disrupting our sense of God. At some point, in each day this week, say to yourself “God is with me today!” We might

want then to say the Lord's Prayer as way of expressing our faith in God with us. How about reading a Bible story that you've known for a while, but not read recently? Take 5 minutes at the beginning or the end of a day to thank God for His love and for the good things of the day to come or the day that is past. Find a fresh way to read the bible, to deepen your faith; can you find new ways to pray, ways that make your sense of God deeper, or broader? Let's develop the idea that God is not just involved in our Sunday story, but that somehow He is involved in shaping every part of our life, that God is there when we laugh and weep, when we dance and mourn.

Learn to trust God. That is far easier to say than it is to do, but it is key to all of this. Learn to trust God for things that make us afraid – God will be with us and will help us cope! Learn to trust God for Church life – God has been at work in the past story of the Church and will be at work in the story of the church yet to come. Learn to trust God for the world in which we live – the world can make us afraid, paralyse us with fear, so that we will not go out, but stay behind the shutters, but God is with us. God is at work; people do unspeakable things, choosing to go to war, or to hate; that does not mean that God approves! How can we be people who learn to trust the God whose story is intertwined with our story because of Jesus? Can we learn to trust God? He will write new pages of our story, we will write new pages of our story. Will these be pages full of faith, full of hope, pages with God at centre?