

Chapel Talk on John Updike's "Short Easter"
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Hymn: #320: O God Our Help in Ages Past

Ecclesiastes 3

- 1: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
- 2: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- 3: a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- 4: a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- 5: a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- 6: a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- 7: a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- 8: a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.
- 9: What gain has the worker from his toil?
- 10: I have seen the business that God has given everyone to be busy with.
- 11: God has made everything suitable in its time; also God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
- 12: I know that there is nothing better for us than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live;
- 13: also that it is God's gift that we should eat and drink and take pleasure in all our toil.

The Hebrew word “ha’olam” that is translated in verse 11 as “a sense of past and future” literally means “the age” or “the world,” which is how the KJV translates it, though the RSV and the NIV translates it as “eternity.” Some have thought that it means to convey something like “the world is too much with us, getting and spending” and that’s why we don’t know what’s going on. Others interpret it as almost the opposite: that God wants us to attend to human affairs and presume not God to scan or try to explain God’s ways to man. Still others see it as God putting a yearning for eternity into us, perhaps because of the mystery of history. I prefer the given translation (NRSV) because I think it conveys best the “yet” or “but” in the remainder of the verse: God gave us our sense of coming from the past and being oriented toward the future, and *yet* or *but*

along with this radical and bracing temporality comes an equally radical and bracing ignorance. For example, given our temporality, we are the only creatures that know that we will die, but, given our ignorance, few of us ever know when, where, how, or the details of why. Meanwhile, says Ecclesiastes, it is the gift from God that we should take enjoy our life while we have it, and take pleasure in our toil. This hope was probably a very this-worldly one; Ecclesiastes tells us that wherever the dead go, it's not heaven: chapter 9: 4&5 says "the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even memory of them is lost," which is why "a living dog is better than a dead lion." Since lions tended to be respected and dogs despised when this book was written, this is a sober-minded invitation to enjoy your life and your work before you inevitably die, decay, and disappear into forgotten oblivion. One and a half cheers.

John Updike's story "Short Easter" is about a man who definitely is not enjoying himself or taking pleasure in his toil. "Fogel was sixty-two and felt retirement drawing closer. In the daily rub he discovered all sorts of fresh reasons for irritation." It so happens that 62 is my age, and maybe Pastors Benson and Koenig asked me to address this story because they saw some of me in Fogel. It is true that I feel retirement drawing closer, and I'm impressed at how quickly one moves from trying to establish oneself in a career to realizing that it's soon to end. And people start asking you about when you will retire. So it isn't hard for me to find fresh reasons for irritation.

But Fogel finds too many. He's a wealthy corporate banker, but he gets teed off at the people holding up the grocery store line buying lottery tickets. "It seemed to him sheer willful obstructionism. Why didn't these people...do their gambling on the stock

market, as he did?” And when he is driving, why do so many cars have to go either faster or slower than he? “If Fogel’s stately Mercedes had been equipped with a button that annihilated other vehicles, he would have used it three or four times a mile.” Fantasy road rage; but just as was underscored by the headline in the business section that irritated him—The Deficit Problem: Is It All In Our Minds?--the rage being only in his mind made it no less real.

Plus it’s Easter and for the first time he could remember, the advent of Daylight Saving Time clipped an hour off the day—hence the title of the story. And now his wife wants him to stop being a “doddery dawdler” over the Sunday paper and help her rake the leaves from under the bushes so that they don’t smother the resurrecting tulips. He wonders to himself, “How did she know he hadn’t, sentimentally, decided to go to church?” It’s hardly a logically valid inference from the fact that he never goes. So he rakes the leaves, but the good toil of gardening did not bring Ecclesiastes’s pleasure. In fact, he daydreams about a ray gun that would vaporize the offending plants. (There’s a theme here!)

“Agricultural labor, this endless plucking of weeds and replotting of fields, had always seemed to him the essence of futility; after sixty years he was coming to realize that all work, legal or medical or, like his own, financial, was also a Sisyphean matter of recycling, of pushing inert and thankless matter back and forth, of turning over (in his case) the profoundly rich compost of corporate debt. All labor was tied to human life, life as pointless as that of any new little jade-green weed already joyously sprouting beneath the damp-blackened leaves.”

And the party that they later go to is also pointless—with the same dozen aging couples; the bloody marys did help him get through yet another conversation about the future of yachting, but they were bad for his cholesterol. “It all added up to a crushing accumulation” and, on this already too-short Easter that is dragging on too long, he ends up taking a nap, which he rarely does because at his age he needs to store up sleep for getting through the night. His wife is chatting endlessly with friends on the phone in their bedroom, so he naps in his son’s room,. And he dreams of his childhood, and of hugging his pet teddy bear, Bruno. Perhaps because of the contrast between Fogel’s dream world and his real world, Updike describes him as waking up “amid that unnatural ache of resurrection—the weight, the atrocious weight, of coming again to life.” And he is frightened, laying “half curled up on the narrow bed like a fetus that has lost flexibility.” And the last line of the story is, “Everything seemed still in place, yet something was immensely missing.”

What are we to make of this? Well, at first I thought that the title was a signal that the problem with Fogel’s life was not the quantity of its length but the quality of its loves. Maybe Updike is suggesting that eternal life is not a endless quantity of life after death but a quality of life in the here and now. Some theologians refer to this view as “realized eschatology” and find Biblical support for it in the gospel of John, which has Jesus saying things like (5:24) “whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me *has* eternal life” (not “will have it”) and, in a prayer to God (17:3) “Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God...” Eternal life involves living in the enjoyment of the presence of God and of the call from Christ to the fulfilling work of discipleship.

I think this would be a reasonable interpretation of what was missing in Fogel's life, but I recall one of Updike's most famous poems, "Seven Stanzas at Easter," which begins with:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

And he goes on with warnings about mocking God with metaphor, analogy, and sidestepping, and even insists that "if we will have an angel at the tomb, make it a real angel heavy with Max Plank's quanta..." and so on. I think this is questionable biology and debatable history, to say nothing of bad theology, since St Paul talks about spiritual bodies, but this poem is frequently read during Easter at certain conservative churches—one of the few Updike works that get read from such pulpits.

Of course he wrote this poem when he was an undergraduate at Harvard in the 50s (he won \$100 for it in a Lutheran fine arts contest) and he wrote "Short Easter" in the 90s. Maybe he changed his mind. Except that in his memoir *Self-Consciousness* (written in the 80s), he defends his early position, even worrying that St Paul gets a bit wobbly and metaphorical with his Platonic dichotomy between natural and spiritual bodies. He admits that "those who scoff at the Christian hope of an afterlife have on their side not only a mass of biological evidence knitting the self-conscious mind tight to the perishing body but a certain moral superiority as well: isn't it terribly, well, *selfish*, and grotesquely egocentric, to hope for more than our animal walk in the sun, from eager blind infancy through the productive and procreative years into a senescence that, by the laws of biological instinct as well as by the premeditated precepts of stoic virtue, will submit to

eternal sleep gratefully? (225)” But Updike replies that “The yearning for an afterlife is the opposite of selfish: it is love and praise for the world that we are privileged...to experience” and he quotes the Spanish philosopher Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life* saying that we hunger and thirst not for some *other* world but for the continuation of this present life, which includes all the others and not just oneself (228).

I’m not at all persuaded by Updike’s vision of an afterlife, but it does seem to me that his point about selflessness is a good one. The best argument I know that we should hope for life after death is the moral one that too many people, through no fault of their own, live desperate lives that are nasty, brutish, and short, and they rarely or never have the opportunity for Ecclesiastes’s enjoyment of life before death (a problem that Ecclesiastes also struggles with). Therefore the only decent thing is to hope that some good may come to them later. And my colleague Charles Taliaferro argues that, since Christians believe that God loves us, and since love means never letting the loved one be annihilated if the lover can help it, and since God can help it, Christians may rely on God’s love and power to provide everlasting life for those creatures created in God’s image.

Of course this assumes that everlasting life would be a good idea for the loved ones, and any number of people have wondered about that. Indeed, in this book of stories that we have been considering this Interim, there is an autobiographical one by the Black-American intellectual Henry Louis Gates, Jr entitled “Eternity.” “When I was in the church, between the ages of twelve and fourteen, staying at home and praying a lot, I used to try to imagine how long eternity could be. ‘A thousand years is like the blink of an eye to the Lord,’ Miss Sarah Russell would say. One day, our eighth-grade science

teacher, Mr. McGoye, told us that to begin to imagine the length of eternity, we should think of a hummingbird. This hummingbird lands upon a huge stone once every five hundred years. The stone is five hundred miles high, five hundred miles wide, and five hundred miles thick. And once every five hundred years, this tiny little hummingbird lands on this rock and sharpens its beak. The length of time it takes the hummingbird to file down that huge stone to the size of a pebble is the equivalent of *one second* of eternity. He stopped the entire class dead with that one. Especially me. ...Sitting up in Heaven with Miss Sarah and Reverend Mon-roe for *that* many years, listening to Mr. Lynn Allen and Mr. Doug Twyman argue about whose turn it was to say the morning prayer, was about as appealing as getting a typhoid shot in your behind every day. Who ever thought eternity was a good idea in the first place? (54&55)” This is not just the worry of Sunday school boys fearing they might have to sing hymns forever and ever and ever; many philosophers such as Bernard Williams and theologians such as Grace Jantzen have suggested that everlasting life would get boring at best. Others, such as Jerry Wells in his book on the logic of eternal joy, argue that this is just lack of imagination and that, although there are self-exhausting pleasures that could get tiresome, there are also repeatable pleasures—he mentions listening to good music, having sex, and dining well—that, distributed in appropriate patterns, likely would never get tedious. Still, we are talking trillions times trillions of years here, and even that span would not put a dent in everlasting life.

Maybe the problem is thinking of eternal life as temporal; perhaps eternity means not endless time but a dimension without time. When theists observe that God seems to enjoy eternal life, so we shouldn't have to worry about it, they often appeal to God's

transcending space and time. This seems a cogent point to me, but do notice that now we are a long ways from Updike's hope for a continuation of this life or something like it. Indeed, all the metaphors and analogies we use to imagine life after death, and even all the concepts we use to think about it, seem inherently and irreducibly spatial and temporal. A non-temporal life is not only experientially transcendent, it is also conceptually transcendent. The most we can say is that we hope for we know not what, other than that we hope that death does not have the last word. And even that is a temporal metaphor.

A hope for we know not what still leaves the question of living a life before death; what is immensely missing in Fogel's life? Updike's reference to Sisyphean recycling recalls the myth of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to push a rock up a mountain near Corinth and, when he almost reaches the top, see it roll back down and be required to push it up again, see it roll down again, push it up again, endlessly, forever. As Updike implies, this myth has become a metaphor of the pointlessness of human life and activity. Stand back far enough, and you might see each generation of humans—being born, procreating, working, and dying--as pushing the rock up that mountain and then having it roll down for the next generation to push up again, generation after generation. Even Ecclesiastes gets into this mood when it talks about the vanity of human activity and how there is nothing new under the sun. Philosopher Richard Taylor says there is real wisdom in this picture of the pointlessness of our lives, but asks us to imagine a variation in the story. Suppose the gods, with a perverse mercy, inject Sisyphus with a drug that makes him enjoy pushing rocks up the hill. He rejoices when it rolls down again because pushing rocks is his thing—he loves it. And notice, Taylor

says, perhaps inspired by Ecclesiastes, each generation wants to pursue its life—to push that rock up the hill. It may be pointless, but who cares if we are doing what we enjoy, if we take pleasure in our toil.

I think there are several problems with Taylor's advice, but for now I merely note that Fogel, at least, wasn't enjoying his toil or his life in general. What was immensely missing? Well, it certainly wasn't toys; he had more than surpassed that level of consumption that economists call a high standard of living. No, what seems to be immensely missing is Ecclesiastes's point about God's gift; instead of feeling gratitude for life and work, Fogel generally feels petty resentments in a rat-race. The farmer and writer Wendell Berry, in his wonderful essay "The Gift of Good Land," argues that agriculture and everything else could be transformed if we simply could see our land, our homes, our family and friends, and our lives as loving gifts (he realistically admits that not all gifts can be perceived as loving). He thinks that from such a perception—being lovingly gifted--would flow gratitude, and from gratitude would flow lives of worth, lives of meaningful service, fulfilling stewardship, and joyful celebration. This sounds idealistic, I know, since along with the gifts come plenty of headaches and other evils, but I think there is deep wisdom in Berry's advice. Perceiving life and work as gift is not unlike that enjoyment drug the gods injected into Sisyphus, except that gratitude is not an injected compulsion; rather it is consciously elicited by a clear-headed acknowledgement of what we are given. Not that it enables us to figure out all of God's ways, but it gives us motivation to trust that goodness has power, that life is not just a rat-race geared for nursing resentments, and that death does not have the final word about a life of worth and service.

So I think that if Fogel could experience the grace to be loved, gifted, and grateful, it could immensely fill his life and provide him with hints of eternal joy both as a help in this life and as a hoped-for home. And we too. May our Easters and all our days only *seem* too short because they are fulfilling.