Chapter Nine

SIMPLE GIFTS

The Book of Ecclesiastes

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS represents what might be called "mainstream" Israelite wisdom—which is not to say predictable, or lacking in insight. On the contrary, the sayings that appear in Proverbs are often profound and even at times surprising, yet they never shock the pious. But now, turning to the book of Ecclesiastes, we encounter the teachings of the most eccentric of the sages, known to his contemporaries by the wholly unique name of Kohelet. It is less a name than a job description: it means something like "one who gathers an assembly." Maybe this name is itself the first of many subtly ironic statements in the book, for one has the sense that people must always have walked away from a session with Kohelet shaking their heads, no longer certain just what to believe.

This book has been regarded from the beginning, it seems, as a biblical anomaly. As with Proverbs, the first-century rabbis who made the final decisions about what books would be included in the canon debated its inclusion, and ever since there have been those who deny that it has any revelatory value. Yet Martin Luther believed that Christians

should read "this noble little book" on a daily basis, and a Vietnam War chaplain attested that this was the one part of the Bible his soldiers were willing to hear. One of my former students, who suffers from recurrent bouts of depression, says that reading Ecclesiastes is for her "like slipping into a warm bath." She feels soothed, supported; her perception of reality has been articulated within the pages of scripture. She is not crazy, no longer alone.

So who was this Kohelet, and what can he tell us about the good life? The first words of the book imply that he is to be identified with Solomon, "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). But the linguistic evidence suggests this ascription is a literary fiction. The language here is close to Hebrew of the rabbinic period. This is probably one of the latest books in the Old Testament, written centuries after Solomon—most likely in the first half of the third century B.C.E., when Jerusalem had become a sophisticated Hellenistic city. The words of Kohelet seem to have been originally addressed to young men with "good prospects," Jews who had assimilated well enough to Greek culture to know some philosophy[1] and who were expected to make a place for themselves in business, or perhaps as minor court officials or magistrates. It is interesting that among all the sages, Kohelet is the only one specifically described in an active teaching role:

> Not only was Kohelet a wise man,
> he also taught knowledge to the people,
> weighing and studying and arranging
> many proverbs. (12:9)

Maybe he was an instructor at the ancient equivalent of a Jerusalem prep school, where his students were the sons of the well-to-do, the next generation of "movers and shakers."

Kohelet's strategy with his students is to beat them at their own game—which is to say, he outdoes his students in the skepticism characteristic of youth:

"Vanity of vanities," said Kohelet,
"vanity of vanities, all is vanity. . . .
All things are wearisome—
one cannot express it.
The eye is unsatisfied with seeing,
and the ear does not get filled from listening.
What has been, that is what will be;
and what has been done, that is what will be done.
There is nothing at all new under the sun.
There is a phenomenon of which someone says,
'See this, it's new!'
It has already been for ages,
those that were before us.
There is no remembrance for former generations,
nor will there be for generations to come.
They will have no remembrance
among those who come after them." (1:2, 8-11)

No contemporary adolescent could be more scathing in describing the delusions under which her successful and success-driven parents labor. For this reason, the book retains to this day a special appeal for youth of high school and college age, as well as for young adults struggling with the disappointments of "the real world." One by one, Kohelet exposes the absurdity of our pretensions to uniqueness, our expectations of lasting fame or enduring achievement. Just because the challenge to our common delusions is so radical, his identity becomes important. Perhaps this explains why the book is ascribed to Solomon. Any lesser figure who dismissed the ultimate value of human wisdom, achievement, and wealth would be open to the charge of sour grapes. The

early rabbis took the Solomonic ascription at face value. Otherwise, they remark, "people might say, 'This fellow, who never owned two cents, presumes to despise all the good things of the world!'"[2] But as it is, Kohelet's words come to us with the authority of someone rich, worldly, and wise, who renders this comprehensive judgment from experience:

I applied myself to inquire and investigate wisely concerning everything that is done under the heavens. It is a bad business that God has given to human beings to be busy with! I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun, and look! It is all vanity and chasing after wind. (1:13-14)

Kohelet's radical nay-saying is a shock to the pious. Yet he is no mere cynic, content to strip us of illusions and then leave us comfortless. Rather, his nay-saying is the means by which this teacher instructs us in a matter essential to the life of faith. From the mainstream sages of Proverbs we may learn about the nature of "righteousness, justice, and equity" (Proverbs 1:3), but Kohelet teaches us about humility. This is the core of his teaching: life can never be mastered, if "mastery" means shaping it in conformity with our desires. It can only be enjoyed, when pleasures great and small come our way. Or, when enjoyment is not possible, then life must be endured. What Kohelet aims to instill in his students is the ability to receive the pleasures of life as the gift they are and to recognize God as sole Giver—"For who eats or who feels anything, apart from him?" (2:25).

It is often said that the message of Ecclesiastes is best summed up as *carpe diem*, "seize the day." But the evidence belies that. The key verb in the book is not "seize" but "give," which occurs twenty-eight times in these twelve chapters—and most often the one who gives is God. The essential message, then, is "Receive the gift." We practice the core religious

virtue of humility by noting with pleasure, day by day, the gifts that come to us from God. And the truth is, most of those are given so regularly that we never even pause to recognize them for the gifts they are.

> Sweet is the light, and good for the eyes
> it is to see the sun. (11:7)

For Jerusalemites, sunny days are more the rule than the exception. This is a small poem (seventeen syllables in Hebrew—exactly the length of a Japanese haiku) about the most ordinary of phenomena: the sunlight that shines on the just and the unjust alike. The fact that Kohelet's brief teaching takes the form of a poem is not negligible. In a tone that is far removed from the teacher's lecture or the preacher's harangue, he invites his students to notice just "how sweet it is." The word "sweet" may be overused in our language, but the equivalent adjective (*matôk*) is rare in biblical Hebrew. So when Kohelet, the consummate nay-sayer, uses that word of simple appreciation, we should take notice. Thus he seeks to initiate us into the daily, down-to-earth practice of humility, the blessed disposition that Jesus himself called "poverty of spirit" (Matthew 5:3).

The word "humility" derives from the Latin word *humus*, meaning "soil." Ecclesiastes is a thoroughly earth-bound book whose focus is on human prospects "under the sun." Kohelet refuses to speculate on the heavenly realm:

> For God is in the heavens and you upon the earth,
> therefore let your words be few. (5:1)

Nor does Kohelet hope for an afterlife. He rejects the possibility of immortality with a firmness that some find offensive:

> I thought, I, within my own heart-and-mind, concerning human beings, to dissociate them from divinity,

> and to see that animals is what they really are.[3] For what happens to human beings, that is the same thing that happens to animals. As is the death of the one, so is the death of the other; and there is one breath belonging to all. And the advantage of human beings over animals—it is non-existent! For everything is fleeting [traditionally: "vanity"].[4] Everything goes to one place.
>
> Everything was from the dust,
> and everything returns to the dust.
>
> Who knows that the breath of human beings rises upward, and the breath of animals descends below, to the earth? Indeed, I have seen that there is nothing better than that a person should take joy in his doings, for that is his portion. For who can bring him to see what will be after him? (3:18-22)

Obviously, Kohelet's religious vision falls short of the full promise of the gospel. Early Judaism—including the Jew Jesus and his first followers—turned decisively away from Kohelet's utter lack of expectation for life after death. So to this day, orthodox Jews along with Christians affirm their faith in the resurrection of the dead. But despite that one departure from Kohelet's thinking, both faith communities accept his book as authoritative and thus uphold his core teaching on accepting and cherishing the gifts of God.

"There is nothing better than that a person should take joy in his doings" (3:22). Always Kohelet is on the look-out for the possibility of joy. But vague encouragement—"Have a good day!"—is not enough for him. He specifically urges us to realize three forms of happiness in our lives: sensual pleasure (eating and drinking, sleep, sunlight), intimate relationships (friendship and conjugal love), and satisfaction in

work. Further, his insistence on enjoyment is something completely different from advocating hedonism. Finding joy in life is a genuinely religious form of humility. Because it is God "who makes all [or 'everything']" (11:5), ultimately God is the Author of every form of enjoyment. The fact that Kohelet breeds in his students love of the world, rather than fear or contempt, is another reason for his enduring appeal to the young.

Joy and Ephemerality

The great problem in making sense of Ecclesiastes is how to reconcile these two things that seem to be mutually exclusive: on the one hand, Kohelet's insistence on enjoyment, and on the other, the pronouncement that stands over the whole book, *havel havalîm*—traditionally translated "vanity of vanities." However, "vanity" is only an approximate translation of the Hebrew word *hevel.*[5] One modern commentator renders it "absurdity." [6] Kohelet is struck and appalled by the total disparity between what *should* happen in a well-ordered world and what actually *does* happen. Far more than earlier sages, Kohelet acknowledges that the phenomenon of moral disorder and contradiction is an enduring reality with which the religious person must wrestle. Here he gives one instance of such moral absurdity:

> There is *hevel* that is done on the earth, namely
> there are righteous people, and what comes to them
> is what fits the doing of the wicked;
> and there are wicked people, and what comes to
> them is what fits the doing of the righteous.
> I said that this, too, is *hevel.* (8:14)

But "absurdity" is not all that *hevel* suggests. The literal meaning of the word is "a mist, vapor, breath." At times, what Kohelet calls *hevel* is something fragile and ephemeral that

disappears without trace. The hard fact of human mortality moves him to render this comprehensive judgment:

> And the advantage of human beings over animals—it
> is non-existent! For everything is *hevel.*

> Everything goes to one place.
> Everything was from the dust,
> and everything returns to the dust. (3:19-20)

In the face of death, everyone and everything is *hevel*, evaporating like early morning mist beneath the strong Jerusalem sun.

Absurdity and ephemerality—these two aspects of *hevel* ultimately work together. Martin Luther, who shows a lively appreciation of Ecclesiastes unmatched in the Christian tradition, remarks incisively that the very fact that life passes quickly away exposes the absurdity of some of our most common behaviors. What Kohelet condemns is

> the depraved affection and desire of us people, who are not content with the creatures [created things] of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate riches, honors, glory, and fame, as though we were going to live here forever; and meanwhile we become bored with the things that are present and continually yearn for other things, and then still others. . . . This is really being suspended between heaven and earth![7]

Kohelet may have had in mind yet a third association of this word *hevel.* The word appears once in the Bible as the name of an individual. It is the Hebrew spelling of the name Abel. Abel's name is his history: ephemerality, absurdity. He enters the biblical story only to die young and senselessly. Kohelet has meditated long and hard on the first few chapters of Genesis, and he echoes its message of our inescapable

mortality: "Everything returns to the dust." In light of Kohelet's preoccupation with death, it is quite possible to hear his initial comprehensive pronouncement—"everyone (or everything) is *hevel*"—as identifying us, every one of us, with Abel (Hevel), son of Adam, the first human being to die. Kohelet does not try to persuade us of the sentimental and ultimately cruel view that every death—or any death—makes sense. Rather, invoking Abel, he reminds us that death is at every moment a possibility for all of us, and therefore he would not have us live foolishly or die "suddenly and unprepared."[8]

The reality of death conditions every moment of life. Kohelet never lets us forget that our days "under the sun" are flying past and will soon be done. But he expects us to be cheerful despite that knowledge—indeed, more cheerful *because of it:*

> Go, eat with pleasure your bread
> and drink with a happy heart your wine,
> for already God has approved your doings.
> In every season let your clothes be white
> and let not oil be lacking upon your head,
> Enjoy life with the woman you love,
> all the days of your fleeting life [*hevel*-life]
> which God has given you under the sun—all your
> fleeting days—
> for that is your portion in life and in your toil
> with which you are toiling under the sun. (9:7-9)

For all his debunking, Kohelet never dismisses joy itself as *hevel*—an absurdity, mere ephemerality. Rather, joy and *hevel* are complementary. Joy is the one thing strong enough to stand up in the face of all that is disappointing, in the face of the fact that all we do achieve and value is passing away and will surely be forgotten. Recognizing that, we might well

succumb to ennui or despair. But Kohelet says, No, rejoice, even in the face of death itself. Maybe it is the shadow of death itself that enables us to invest ourselves so deeply in this imperfect life, these imperfect people "under the sun":

> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all
> your might,
> for there is no doing or thought or knowledge or
> wisdom in Sheol,
> to which you are going. (9:10)

One of many seeming contradictions in this book is that Kohelet completely rejects the notion of any lasting human achievements, yet he tells us to do whatever we do with everything we've got. Moreover, he offers the stunning assurance, unparalleled in the Bible, that "already God has approved your doings" (9:7). This might be a dangerous assurance if it were addressed to an audience of potential arsonists. But Kohelet is not talking to those who have cast off all restraint. Much more likely, he is speaking to people like us: extremely responsible, moderately religious folk who are perpetually anxious to do the right thing. Kohelet understands them because he is one of them: those who strive for great achievements and try to make sense of everything, to secure the future against disaster and the system against injustice—and because they can never wholly succeed, they are in grave danger, as Kohelet says of himself, of "hat[ing] life, for grievous to me is the doing that is done under the sun—for everything is *hevel* and chasing after wind" (2:17).

To the perpetually anxious, Kohelet offers the healthful asceticism of letting go of our vain pretense to determine the future and instead focusing resolutely on the present, receiving with an open hand the pleasures and the opportunities it offers. Among them is the opportunity to work hard—and sometimes, by the gift of God, to derive pleasure from the

work we do. This is perhaps the area where Kohelet can be most helpful to modern westerners, for he reflects more carefully on the nature of work than does any other biblical writer. Therefore he can help us with our own pressing need to develop a sane theology of work. For we are, on the whole, a people who work very hard and get too little pleasure from our work. Kohelet could be speaking directly to us:

> This is what I myself have seen to be good, yes, beautiful: to eat and drink and take pleasure in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the number of days of life which God has given one.... [T]o accept one's lot and to rejoice in one's toil—this, it is the gift of God. (5:17-18)

Kohelet is not idealistic about work. Hard work is a necessity, and the gift of joy that may come from it can only be received; it cannot be coerced. Moreover, Kohelet harbors no illusions about why most of us work as hard as we do: we do it to beat out the competition. "I myself have seen all the toil and the skill in doing, that it is envy, one person of another. This, too, is *hevel* and chasing after wind" (4:4). We do not know any work that is not affected, you might say, by our fallen condition; pride and jealousy are powerful motivating factors for excellence. Yet insofar as we strive to best our neighbor, to that extent we are chasing after wind.

"Chasing after wind"—the Hebrew phrase may convey a sense that is not obvious in translation. As is well known, the Hebrew word *ruaḥ* means "wind," but also "spirit"; so it is possible to see some deflating of our spiritual pretensions here. Work is for many people a matter of "chasing after spirit." Probably this is more true in our society than it was in the ancient world, so Kohelet himself may not intend a pun. But I do see here a play on meanings that reflects our modern context. This is our own peculiar form of *hevel*,

absurdity: we overwork, looking not for pleasure, which work can give, but for something it cannot, something that we vaguely term "spiritual satisfaction." Professional commitment is one of the primary forms of idolatry among white-collar Amer-icans—and here I include clergy collars. Looking for ultimate meaning in any form of work, including church work, inevitably leads to deep disappointment and bitterness. When one does not get the desired promotion; when one's own vision for the program, the institution, the community does not prevail; or perhaps when one just burns out from too much effort expended, too little pleasure received as a gift from God—all this is *hevel* and chasing after wind.

Learning to Lose Ourselves

Kohelet is often wrongly viewed as a cynic. Whereas a cynic is someone who has settled, more or less comfortably, into a fixed view of life (a negative one), Kohelet is a lifelong learner, a true wise man. The best evidence for this is the fact that at the end of his book, we see a very different perspective on life than the one with which he began. The haunting poem in the final chapter is generally called "the allegory of death":

> Remember your Creator, in the days of your youth,
> before the evil days come,
> and the years arrive when you will say, "I have no
> delight in them."...
> On the day when the guards of the house shake,
> and the strong men tremble,
> and the grinding women cease, for they are few
> and the women who look out through the windows
> are darkened. (12:1, 3)

These several metaphors for "the evil days" are commonly taken as referring to the disabilities of old age: tottering limbs, teeth that can no longer chew, eyes grown dim.

> and the dust returns to the earth as it was,
> and the breath (or "spirit")[9] returns to God who
> gave it.
> "*Havel havalîm,*" said Kohelet,
> "Everything is *hevel.*" (12:7-8)

The poems that begin and end the book are a matched pair, in that they have the same refrain: "*Havel havalîm,* absurdity of absurdities, ephemerality of ephemeralities." Yet what strikes me is how different in tone the two poems are. At the beginning of the book, Kohelet is world-weary, jaded, as he laments the pointlessness of it all: "There is nothing at all new under the sun.... There is no remembrance for former generations, nor will there be for generations to come" (1:9, 11). By the end of the book, the facts have not changed, but Kohelet's response is dramatically altered. Now he speaks with open urgency: "Remember!"—though we ourselves will be forgotten. Although nothing is really new, still every season of life is not the same. Youth is the time for remembering your Creator, "before the evil days come" (12:1). There is something of Dylan Thomas's tone here, in the poem written for his dying father: "Do not go gentle into that good night." But there is also a difference. Thomas urges, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."[10] Kohelet says, "Remember your Creator." It is the difference between furiously grasping at your ebbing life, and recollecting in calmness and sobriety both life's source and its fleeting quality.

"Remember your Creator, *in the days of your youth.*" There will come a time for many of us when we will need all our strength just to endure, when memory and judgment will no longer be reliable. There may come a time when even

repentance is no longer possible. It is a sobering thought, that someday we may lack the flexibility of mind and spirit to turn back to God. Kohelet does not pull his punches: bearing gracefully the losses that attend old age requires more than courage; we must also grow wise. "Remember your Creator—and do it now," he tells his youthful students. Kohelet's profound insight is that a good old age (to say nothing of a good death) takes years of preparation, years of "un-selfing." We do well to start young, getting unstuck from a fixation on our own egos, our own accomplishments and desires, even our own best qualities.

In the course of his book, Kohelet takes us through the whole journey from preoccupation with self to a costly forgetfulness of self. This is evident even in his language. In the opening chapters, Kohelet uses the first person pronoun over and over. That usage is a striking mark of his style, because pronouns are unnecessary in most Hebrew sentences. Since all verbs are inflected (internally marked for person, number, and gender), pronouns are generally used only for emphasis. But at the outset, Kohelet repeatedly uses the pronoun *'anî,* "I." Thus he calls attention to his own viewpoint and action:

> I, Kohelet, I was king over Israel in Jerusalem. (1:12)

> I said, I, to my heart, Look, I, I have grown great and
> accumulated wisdom. (1:16)

> I said, I, in my heart, Come on, let me conduct an
> experiment in enjoyment. (2:1)

Yet by the end of the book, when he gives "the end of the matter," he has moved 180 degrees:

> God you shall fear, and his commandments keep;
> for this is every person. (12:13)

Some scholars regard this as a pious addition by some meddling editor, but consider another possibility: could this not be the authentic voice of the wise teacher who has seen it all, done it all, and come up with no new sources of meaning for human life? Rather than being a pious platitude, it can be taken as a statement of utter humility. In a poem that owes much to Kohelet, the modern Christian poet T. S. Eliot says:

> The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
> Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.[11]

Kohelet takes the grand tour of life, and in the end his sophistication gains him no wisdom more valuable than what he first learned as a child at home. It is no different from the traditional wisdom his mother might have taught him, straight out of Torah and Proverbs: "Fear God and keep his commandments." But the final phrase is Kohelet's signature: "For this is every person." Translating more literally, one could read: "This is every Adam—every human being." It is a startling statement, so much so that translators habitually try to domesticate it, as in the *New Revised Standard Version*: "For that is the whole duty of everyone." But Kohelet's summary is in fact far more radical. Fearing God and keeping the commandments is more than a duty. It is what constitutes our humanity. It is our personhood. Kohelet is a man who has owned up fully to disillusionment and despair; he has looked unblinkingly at old age and death. Having done so, he is sobered but fearless—or almost so. Only one fear is left, and Kohelet more than any other biblical writer shows us what fear of God looks like "under the sun." It is a posture of complete humility—that is, groundedness—and open-handed receptivity.

Learning to receive life as pure gift, we gradually prepare ourselves to receive even God. The medieval Christian mystic

Meister Eckhart has a teaching that might serve as a commentary on Ecclesiastes:

> God does not give gifts, nor did he ever give one, so that people might keep it and take satisfaction in it; but all were given—all he ever gave on earth or in heaven—that he might give this one more: himself. Therefore I say that we must learn to look through every gift and every event to God and never be content with the thing itself. There is no stopping place in this life—no, nor was there ever for any person, no matter how far along one's way one had gone. This above all, then, be ready for the gifts of God and always for new ones.[12]

From this we can begin to understand why some Christians, including profound theologians such as Jerome and Luther, have seen this resolutely earth-bound book of Ecclesiastes as preparing the way for Christ. Theirs is a fairly obvious argument: by his relentless debunking, Kohelet weans us from all false wisdom and thus prepares the way for Jesus Christ, the true wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). Less obvious, but perhaps more penetrating, is the insight that Kohelet aims chiefly to enable us to receive the gifts of God—and Christians understand that Christ is the ultimate gift. There is "a season for every matter under the heavens" (3:1), and perhaps the liturgical season best suited to Kohelet's book is Advent. Ecclesiastes does not prepare us for Christ's coming as does Isaiah, by prophetic promises and messianic visions. Yet in a quite different way this book suits the mood of that sober-but-not-grim season, when we seek to open our hearts to receive the ever-new gift of God in Christ.

Notes

1. There are clear points of connection between ideas Kohelet articulates and contemporary Greek philosophy. See the fuller discussion in my commentary, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs,* Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000).
2. *Midrash Kohelet Rabba* 3:11, cited in *Koheleth—The Man and His World, a Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 40.
3. The meaning of 3:18 is highly uncertain, and the text may be corrupt. My translation follows (approximately) the NJPS *Tanakh.*
4. The Hebrew word here translated as "fleeting" is *hevel.* See the discussion of this word in the following section.
5. The vowels are variable in Hebrew words; the constant letters by which the root is recognized are the consonants *h-v-l.*
6. Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).
7. Martin Luther, *Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986) vol. 15, pp. 8, 11.
8. The Great Litany (BCP 149).
9. The Hebrew word is *ruaḥ,* which, as discussed above, means "wind" or "spirit," and also "breath."
10. Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1952), 116.
11. *Four Quartets,* "East Coker II."
12. "The Talks of Instruction," *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation,* trans. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), 32; translation slightly modified.