



From the Pulpit: March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Ecclesiastes 11:1–6

Lent in Plain Sight, II: Bread

Lent is marked by peculiar disciplines. We begin by placing ashes on our foreheads. We help the children put away the alleluias so that the notes ring with magnified joy on Easter morning. We might fast or take up a new spiritual practice. Lent is an invitation to slow down, to reflect on the meaning of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During this sermon series, *Lent in Plain Sight*, ordinary objects serve as tangible touchstones amidst the mysteries of faith. Today's reading, is a peculiar passage in a peculiar book in the peculiar season of Lent.

Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back.

Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.

When clouds are full, they empty rain on the earth; whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.

Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

“You do not know the
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the chilly North Atlantic waters near their home to an uninhabited island. There they recovered a battered mini boat named the Rye Riptides. The mini boat was a science project built by New Hampshire middle school students at Rye Junior High despite the build being delayed by remote learning during the pandemic.

After he located and recovered the boat, Karel brought it to his school. His fellow Norwegian students opened the cargo hold and were delighted to find photos of their new friends across the ocean in New Hampshire. The Rye Riptides was one of 20 boats launched in 2020 through Educational Passages, an organization that seeks to foster learning about weather and ocean currents and

to foster connection with the community where the boat lands. The odds of these boats being found are slim, which makes this story all the more exciting. Rye Riptide's onboard GPS recorded a circuitous and unpredictable 8,000 mile route propelled by the whims of the ocean currents.

Qoheleth, the pen name of the author of Ecclesiastes, knows something of the unpredictable ocean currents and fickle forces of nature. Because this teacher is believed to have lived after the Babylonian exile, but a few centuries before Jesus, the author knows the uncertainty of nations at war, people forced to find refuge in foreign lands, the whims of dictators, and volatile economic systems that offer no guarantees.

A few weeks ago a Norwegian sixth grader named Karel, his parents, and their puppy boated across

Like the philosophy major across the dorm room hall who relishes late night conversations, the author of Ecclesiastes doesn't hesitate to challenge the widely held premise that righteousness will be rewarded, and evil will be punished. We can hardly argue with their observations of current events. Who among us hasn't questioned why evil too often profits and horrific things happen to the best people we know. Ecclesiastes is a peculiar, contradictory book that offers more questions than answers. And this may be why Ecclesiastes get very little air time in worship or Bible study. Though from memorials or popular music we may be familiar with Qoheleth's wisdom, "there is a time for every matter under heaven."

One scholar says this about its unlikely inclusion in the biblical canon:

*"The book's survival and eventual acceptance show that the [Teacher's] words rang true to the Jews struggling to live at the mercy of foreign rulers in a world where God seems remote and human effort ineffectual."*¹

Perhaps the teacher gives words to our helplessness as we encounter the relentless schoolyard bully; or as we struggle to stay mentally and physically healthy in the face of new diagnoses; or when senseless tragedies happen too close to home. Perhaps the teacher gives voice to our feelings when we watch the news, wondering if the seizure of a handful of oligarch's yachts will bring some measure of peace to the world.

Qoheleth is frank with us, not hesitating to name human ignorance and our ineptitude four times in these six verses alone. You do not know what disaster will happen. You cannot control the clouds or the wind. You do not know the mysteries of life. **"You do not know the work of God, who makes everything."**

"Qoheleth's advice is to, as one scholar put it 'act both daringly and prudently' at the shoreline of uncertainty".

As we stand facing seas of uncertainty, Qoheleth offers peculiar wisdom: "Send out your bread upon the waters and after many days you will get it back." You are not alone if you wonder what good it does for soggy bread to float back to shore. There are at least four interpretations of this curious verse:

- It may be advice for a farmer to sow on wet ground.
- Perhaps it refers to ancient beer making practices where women threw loaves into vats of water to ferment.²
- Some propose it encourages maritime trade.
- Most frequently, the bread cast upon the waters is interpreted as a metaphor for charity and generosity.³

Since interpretation is elusive, the second imperative in the text is helpful here: "In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know what will prosper." Whether this is about seeds or trade or brewing, perhaps the best summary of Qoheleth's

advice is to, as one scholar put it "act both daringly and prudently"⁴ at the shoreline of uncertainty.

Teachers around the world offer a model for daring against the odds and making a prudent investment in future well-being. Look at the teachers in our community who cast their lesson plans onto Zoom during the early pandemic with no way to know what was ahead. Then these same brave souls made pivot upon pivot so kids could return and remain in class.

² Horman, Michael, *Vetus testamentum*, January 2000.

³ Magarik, Larry, *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, January 2000, p268

⁴ Wolfe, Lisa Michele, *Wisdom Commentary: Qoheleth*, p 154.

¹ Burnette-Bletsche, Rhonda, *Studying the Old Testament*, p 284.

Or in this center photo below, students at Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. This is one of the largest refugee camps in the world, opened 30 years ago when Sudanese children fled the civil war. It still houses 150,000 people. Despite students having to share textbooks with as many as 18 others, thanks to their teachers, students in Kakuma pass national exams at an 88% rate—surpassing Kenya’s national average.⁵



Perhaps you have seen this photo above on social media which shows an unidentified teacher in a Ukrainian bunker, reading to students despite the war outside. I can’t think of more daring and prudent behavior.

Every day teachers cast their knowledge to the sea of faces before them, knowing—no hoping—that knowledge will return in the future through their students’ contributions to society.

Teachers cast wisdom; farmers sow their seeds. I grew up on a farm where the lively conversation at the overflowing lunch table, where workers and family gathered, stopped the moment the farm report came on the AM radio. Will the ground be ready to plant? Will the July heat wither the crops? What is the price of a bushel of corn or soybeans sold today? No matter what the report said, once lunch was over, it was time to get back to work, rain or shine.

Thanks to its unique soil, among the richest in the world, Ukraine is nicknamed the breadbasket of the world. The country produces 18% of the world’s sunflower seed, 13% of corn production, and 8% of wheat.⁶

⁵ <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/inside-the-world-s-five-largest-refugee-camps/>

⁶ https://en.as.com/en/2022/03/01/latest-news/1646154375_952794.html

Ukrainian farmers met virtually with the Macon, Illinois Farm Bureau⁷ last week and shared how they are resisting Russian forces, sometimes using farm equipment to help refuel military vehicles.

Qoheleth knows that agriculture is a risky business at the best of times. These Ukrainian farmers are daring, not be paralyzed by fear. They do not know the work of God or whether their toil will prosper, but they are planting seeds anyway.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus shows us God who scatters seeds of grace with unimaginably wild abandon. No human farmer would waste grain on the rocks or in the thorns. The other day I joined the preschoolers from A Joyful Noise in their search for our Church image of the sower. They were delighted to find the seeds sparkling from the sun shining through the window at the back of the sanctuary.

Seeds grow into wheat, which is ground into flour, kneaded, and baked to become bread. Jesus was a teacher—not only a teacher—who used the ordinary to open our hearts to the sacred, the mysterious ways of God. In her recent book, *Freeing Jesus*, Diana Butler Bass compares Jesus to sages like Qoheleth:

“A sage is a certain kind of teacher, one who upsets convention by offering a different way of understanding and living, a way that embodies wisdom.

Jesus was that sort of teacher... He invited [his followers] to a way of life based on a wildly gifting God, who created everything, who turns authority upside down, who shatters the pretenses of power, who proclaims a kingdom of the heart, and who brings the poor, the outcast, the forgotten, and the mourning to a table set with an endless feast.”

⁷ https://herald-review.com/news/local/watch-now-macon-county-farmers-gain-new-understanding-of-war-in-ukraine/article_b19fcb8a-2087-572b-87a9-9d7f095cb4e1.html

—Prayers of the People—

By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

We do not know God's ways. We struggle to see evidence of a wildly gifting God in the midst of so much human suffering. During this Lenten season we slow down, using everyday objects to reflect on Jesus's life, teaching, death, and resurrection, finding, like many before us, that it is extraordinary enough to hold all that we do not know: the peculiar, the tragic, the mysterious, the ineffable. This Lenten season and always, may Jesus, the bread of life, nourish and sustain us.

Having tasted and seen the bread of life, let us cast our generosity, mercy, and compassion wildly, trusting that the currents of God's grace flow toward the heart of God's kingdom. Let us plant seeds of goodness with abandon, that there might be bread to share at the feast.

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With gratitude, we worship you, God of the Lenten journey. With your path underfoot, we enter a muscular trust, your safekeeping evident even when what comes next is unknown and unpredictable. Bound together, we depend on your protection, for in its own way the shared distress of our international community is inescapable, and our hearts are drawn east as we watch Ukrainians seeking out bomb shelters and basements, stockpiling food and medical supplies, and making unthinkable decisions in the darkness of night. As we seek peace, make holy every failure, blessing every attempt to walk the trail toward ceasefire. May peace penetrate even the hardest of hearts. Do not snuff out hope. Scatter seeds of possibility along the debris-showered streets. Make a way, O God. Make a way.

We pray for all who are in danger. For the global south, still ravaged by COVID, slowly, faithfully distributing vaccines day after day. For countries still in semi-lockdown. For those who carry the weight of grief and fog of exhaustion. For those facing holy frustration and hardship around every corner. For those worried about their children. For those forging a new identity, unwanted. For those rustling up something new despite the swirl of uncertainty. Give us courage, O God. Give us resolve. Give us fortitude to faithfully face whatever is ahead. Give us wisdom, knowledge, and joy, making everything fitting in its time.

We see you as the sun rises and sets, returning again each morning to the place where it dawns. We see you as the wind blows south, north, east, around and around retuning again. We see you as the streams flow to the sea but the sea is never full, continuing to flow. Let us see you anew as spring unfolds, day after day, a shift, a bloom, a shimmer, a whirl, a possibility stretching out before us.

And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us saying: Our Father.... Amen.