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“A Threefold Cord is Not Quickly Broken”  
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12  
LPTS Dec. 4, 2009

Our text from Ecclesiastes this morning is about human solidarity. It’s about working together, lifting each other up, keeping each other warm, protecting each other, finding strength by intertwining our finite lives. You may be thinking, “is that the best text she could come up with for a service commemorating World AIDS day”? In the face of the horrors of AIDS, don’t we need a stronger word from Scripture? A reminder of God’s sovereign power to deliver us, a reassurance of the promised new heavens and new earth? No doubt those are also words we need to hear. But today we will listen to the distinctive voice of the teacher of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet.

Some parts of Scripture tell us how God saves and delivers us; other parts tell us how God will bring everything to eschatological fulfillment. But the horizon of the book of Ecclesiastes is creation. Qohelet’s concern is with God’s presence in the concrete realities of everyday human life. Qohelet reflects on the ordinary, daily stuff—our work, our joys and sorrows, the limits of our wisdom, the fact of our mortality. The theological question Qohelet asks is, how does God relate to us as creator? And how are we to relate to God and to each other as creatures? If our preaching is going to be accountable to the whole Bible, we have to listen to Qohelet’s voice too.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) explores the irreducibly threefold way in which God relates to us in creation, consummation, and redemption, and lifts up the canonical wisdom literature as a prime locus for thinking about God’s relating to us as creator.

God the Creator gives and sustains life—that is enough reason to praise God, to rejoice in God’s generous grace. What God creates is good and finite. To be finite is to be vulnerable—vulnerable to disease, vulnerable to injury, and vulnerable to death. The finitude of creaturely existence is part of the creation God declared good. Our finitude is not a defect. It is not a sin. It is not something from which we need to be saved. We are dust, and to dust we will return. But in the meantime God our creator calls us to be wise, to work for the flourishing of creaturely life. So as fellow creatures, we work together, lift each other up, keep each other warm, protect each other—all towards our common flourishing, and the flourishing of the whole creation. Qohelet never tires of reminding us that what flourishes is finite life, life “lived on borrowed breath,”<sup>2</sup> a precious, fleeting gift of God.

Qohelet’s modest message of creaturely solidarity may be just what we need in the face of HIV/AIDS. AIDS leaves our theological wisdom tongue-tied. It’s a disease so monstrous, afflicting such appalling pain on individuals, families, and whole communities, that we find ourselves confounded, speechless. What can we say? How can there be something as terrible as AIDS in the world God made and loves? Qohelet at least can tell us what *not* to say. Qohelet can keep us from corrosive Christian theologies that claim to have God’s plan in horrible human suffering all figured out. We have all encountered fellow Christians who seem to have the whole divine road map spread out in front of them and so are in a position to give the rest of us confident progress reports. Qohelet, by contrast, reminds us that wisdom about God’s mysterious ways in the world regularly eludes us. “I said, ‘I will be wise,’” Qohelet proclaims.

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<sup>2</sup> James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1981), p. 198.

“But it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (Eccl. 7:23) In particular, Qohelet holds us back from theologies that reflexively look for sin as the explanation for every occasion of human suffering. We hear that malignant theology from Job’s friends. We hear this theology from Jesus’ own disciples: “Who sinned so that this man was born blind?” (John9:2) And we hear it over and over again in the face of the AIDS pandemic. Is there any disease since the plagues of the middle ages that has been more linked to Christian accusations of human sin and divine punishment than HIV/AIDS? Instead of pointing the finger, Qohelet reminds us that in the face of terrible human suffering “Two are better than one.... A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

At the end of John’s gospel, Jesus says repeatedly to Simon Peter, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-17) Jesus doesn’t say “save my sheep from their sins,” or “transport my sheep to a place where weeping and crying are no more”—Jesus says, feed them. “Do you love me?” Christ says to us. “Then feed my sheep. Walk alongside them, keep them warm, protect them when they are in danger, lift them up when they fall down.” God knows we need redemption from the sin that divides and alienates us from God and each other. God knows we hope for consummation, when the whole creation and we as part of it will be fulfilled and perfected. But Qohelet reminds us that God is also our creator, who sustains and blesses us as creatures, and calls us to a distinctively *creaturely* faithfulness. It’s ordinary, daily stuff. Feeding the children orphaned by AIDS at Fletcher Padoko’s orphanage in Malawi. Comforting the frightened and desperate Louisville man just diagnosed with HIV. This daily faithfulness to our fellow creatures is also part of the gospel with which we have been entrusted.

Qohelet portrays our lives before God on ordinary days when, in Ellen Davis' words, "water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come for lunch."<sup>3</sup> Most days in the church are like that. When confronting something as awful and overwhelming as HIV/AIDS, we as Christians have no magic wand to wave, no easy shortcut in the management of reality. We pray. We hope. We rejoice when God's grace comes in big or surprising ways. And we also give thanks for what Belden Lane calls God's "unexceptional grace,"<sup>4</sup> a grace often tangibly mediated through the hands and words of others. Part of the ongoing work of Christ in our midst is to create this grace-filled solidarity among us, a solidarity that ripples outward towards all who need hope and healing.

We trust in the everlasting power and love of God. But this trust does not relieve us of the need for daily human discernment, for struggle, for patience. It does not let us float above the ordinary, continuing needs of our fellow creatures. Qohelet calls us to life together before God, a life that shares the burdens and sorrows of others, a life that celebrates their small joys and victories—a good T-cell count, an evening with friends, the flowers of another springtime.

We come to the table of Christ the compassionate one, the one who wept at Lazarus' tomb, the one who lifted up those who were bowed down by physical suffering and social stigma. Christ invites you to this table—not because you're strong, not because you're whole in mind or body. Come to me, you who are heavy laden, Christ says, and I will give you rest. The bread and wine are not some magic potion, not some superfood that will make the suffering

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (Westminster Bible Companion)* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Belden C. Lane, *The solace of fierce landscapes: exploring desert and mountain spirituality* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 94.

and grief and fear of earthly life disappear. In these elements is the promise that we can lean on Christ for the strength to keep going, the strength to bear each other up. And in these elements is the simple joy of a shared meal, companionship in our common creatureliness, the reassurance that we are here at all and here together because of God's gift. "Two are better than one.... A threefold cord is not quickly broken." Thanks be to God our Creator, whose giving knows no ending.