# Four texts for a new year.

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13•Psalm 8•Revelation 21:1-6a•Matthew 25:31-46

Today’s scripture readings bring together four of my favorite texts in one day.

Here is Ecclesiastes declaiming there is a time and a season for everything: good will happen, bad will happen. Pain will happen; pleasure will happen. Things will be created and then destroyed. Love bursts forth, and sometimes dies. We gain and we lose; We cry and we laugh. And what is it all for? It’s a bit of a pessimistic picture—and you may know that I can tend towards pessimism—so it has resonated all my life. But his answer to “What is it all for?” has always seemed a bit anti-climatic: God has made everything for its time and place, but we humans can’t possibly know what the proper time and place is. So, we should take pleasure in our work and in what we eat and drink, find joy where we can, as long as we can.

Here is the psalmist, with a higher view of our estate:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.

The psalmist marvels that God, who made the very heavens above us with all of its vastness, pays any attention to humanity, giving us such power over the earth. For the psalmist, it is not enough to seek simple pleasures; we must remember that all creation is under our command. And this is an empirical fact—it is hard to imagine any part of the world which has not been affected by seven billion people living and consuming and dying every day. And we should live more authentically to this fact, asking how we are doing as stewards of God’s creation.

Here is John the Prophet, with his vision of the New Jerusalem. We do not go to heaven, according to John—Heaven comes down to earth, and God makes a permanent and obvious home among us. And there is no formal temple, for God is the temple; the Lamb is with us. No more death, or crying, or pain; fathers don’t die; cancer doesn’t exist; relationships don’t fail. God will rescue us from all our follies, though (says John in a part of this passage conveniently left out by the lectionary compilers) we can through our abominable actions, not be allowed in to this city. What this means practically, I don’t know; it’s not my job now to judge. But it is my job to ask, What should I be doing and when? Who should I be listening to? What’s the most important thing?

And finally, here is Jesus, in this parable so loved by Mennonites (and one of the reasons why we became Mennonites; that this passage is so dear). Here is Jesus with his take on the last days, when the sheep are put on one side, and the goats on the other; the faithful and the unfaithful are divided, not based on their race, or social class, on whether they are clever or educated, not even based on the adherence to a particular theological formula, but based on this:

Did you feed those who are hungry?

Did you house those who had no home?

Did you clothe those who had no clothing?

Did you visit those who are in prison?

Did you help those who are sick?

In short, did you love those who needed love?

*Contra* Ecclesiastes, we can know what we should be doing. Because we do these things, we are in the same place as Jesus. If we find this distasteful—well, Jesus won’t be spending time with us, either; when the New Jerusalem comes down and the Lamb of God is the temple of God, we will not be welcome.

So, it’s New Year’s Day, a day for new beginnings, to recommit ourselves to living life aright. Our texts remind us that God made us for joy and pleasure; to act as stewards over creation; to prepare our souls to live in the New Jerusalem; to love those who need love. As the new year turns, I commend you to recommit to these things.