

## **Time and Chance Happen to All**

As a parish minister, I often preached from the book of Ecclesiastes at some point during the summer. One of my favorite Old Testament books, Ecclesiastes is where you find the familiar saying, “There is nothing new under the sun.” That seemed fitting on hot, lazy days. Ecclesiastes also proclaims, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” a sentiment I felt when returning to routine labors after the delights of summer vacation.

Another favorite passage goes like this: “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.”

What I especially like about Ecclesiastes is its realism and its subversive attack on all conventional notions about worldly success and divine favor. Most people, religious or not, tend to believe that if you prosper or succeed, it must be your own deserving. And if you fail, or happen to be poor, it’s probably your own fault. There may be a kernel of truth to these notions, but they are mainly the conceits of persons who are loathe to acknowledge that most of the good things that have happened to them are not of their own deserving.

Nothing endeared me more to Herman B Wells than the fact that he titled his autobiography “Being Lucky.” How right he was! Of course he was also a consummate educator, politician, and public servant. But if he had not been in the right place at the right time, who would have known? Success and failure in this world are due more to circumstances of birth, upbringing, and happenstance than anything else. In other words, luck. Some people are much luckier than others.

So, if you’re having a hard time of it in this world, there may be some things you can do to make your life better. But don’t blame yourself for everything that goes wrong. Your circumstances are not entirely your fault. And God knows, they are not a sign that God has it in for you.

I don’t know what Jesus thought about Ecclesiastes, but he clearly understood that the disparities and inequalities of this world do not reflect God’s view of how things ought to be. If anything, he anticipated some turning of the tables in the world to come.

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