

## Chances Are

<sup>NRS</sup> **Ecclesiastes 9:4** But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. <sup>5</sup> The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. <sup>6</sup> Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun. <sup>7</sup> Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. <sup>8</sup> Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. <sup>9</sup> Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. <sup>11</sup> 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.

This year is the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of John Calvin, the moody Frenchman who Reformed folks like Presbyterians look to as a kind of founder. As part of celebrating this birthday Princeton Seminary has invited the world to read through Calvin's main work- the terribly named Institutes of the Christian Religion. The other day I was reading some of the reflections folks are posting. And there's been one I just haven't been able to shake.

The guy calls himself Boomer in the Pew, and he was a successful businessman whose goal in life was to make enough money to retire at 50. Not really having anything else in mind, though, Boomer kind of tanked after he retired. He was used to being a big shot, making big calls and big deals. Now his biggest challenge was the pot hole bunker guarding the green on the 17<sup>th</sup> hole. Without going into all the gory detail he does- let's just say it was hard for him to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Well, he latched on to this project of reading through the Institutes and sharing his insights with the world. And all this is very good- very laudable. But the other day I'm reading and the topic is providence. Providence is the idea that God not only creates the

world- but that God cares for it, provides for it. To some like Calvin this guidance is so total God seems almost like a puppet master. So ol' Boomer starts writing about how he recently sold a home- the last big deal that rocketed him into his early retirement. It was just a few months ago- in Michigan. Like the worst market in the world, right? Like Ethiopia has a better real estate market than Michigan. But he puts it on the market and in 5 days he had that sucker sold. And when he tells all his friends, he was shocked by their responses. They talked about luck. They talked about what amazing skills he had. One person even mentioned Karma. But no one talked about providence- about God.

He then copies an enormous amount of Calvin and scripture and eventually arrived at this statement about his house. He writes, and I quote: "It was God's divine providence that our house sold so quickly. It has nothing to do with luck."

To Boomer in the Pew it all comes down to this question- do things happen because of God, OR is it all just chance, blind luck? Another way of saying it- does everything happen for a reason, or are there accidents- are there things that just happen?

Now, you know me. Normally I'm all about telling stories and giving you like miles and miles of room for you all to come up with your own conclusions. I don't normally just come right out and tell you what I think. But today I kind of feel like putting my cards right out there on the table. Now you all know I believe in God- I've dedicated my life to faith. Pretty much all of my thinking, my reading, ever since I can remember most of it centers around God. And I don't just believe in God; I experience God, I feel God; faith is something alive and real for me- not just a set of ideas. BUT.

But I also believe things just happen sometimes. I believe accidents happen- accidents we can't explain. I don't believe God is a kind of puppet master pulling every string and guiding every moment. And, not to get too personal with Boomer in the Pew, I just don't believe God cares about a rich man's home selling in five days so he has enough left over to spend his days playing golf in Arizona- at least not when there are children right here in Oregon who don't have enough food to eat.

Now just so you know- Boomer does have folks like Calvin and Augustine on his side. Most of the great theologians in the church would say I'm on pretty thin ice here. So I've spent this week kind of turning all this over in my mind- how to make sense of believing in God and believing in chance and accidents, too. And I can't tell you how relieved I was when I stumbled across ol' Ecclesiastes and I realized at least I'm not the only one thinking this way.

Now Ecclesiastes is by far one of the most interesting books in scripture. It's written from the perspective of someone called Qoheleth, the teacher. And the whole book of Ecclesiastes is about Qoheleth trying to make sense of the world around him and trying find meaning in it. And what makes it one of the most surprising books of the Bible to folks is how serious Qoheleth is about his questions. He looks at the world and really looks at- noticing not just the religious things, the nice things, but all the chaos, too.

Like our text this morning. Qoheleth here takes a good look at the world and sees something that anyone who has been alive for five minutes knows- he sees that life doesn't always work out like you think it should. He says, the race doesn't always go to

the swift, the strongest army doesn't always win the battle, and the smartest don't always get paid the most. And every single one of you has seen this. It's what makes the Dilbert cartoons so painfully funny- when it comes to the folks at the top they're heads may be pointy, but their leadership isn't always so sharp. My mom had a phrase for this- you may have heard it. Life's not fair. Sometimes when I would be particularly mad about something, she would even sing it. With a giant smile on her face she'd go, "Life's not fair." I will refrain from sharing the thoughts that went through my head. ☺

Qoheleth at least a little more poetic in how he puts it. Qoheleth's says life isn't fair this way: "time and chance," he says, "happen to us all." Time and chance. The best don't always win. The smartest folks aren't always rewarded. Time and chance affect us all. *Chance*. Isn't that something? I can't tell you how many people I read this week say if you believe in the Bible you just can't believe in chance- but here it is.

And Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, he believes in God. Heck, he gets an entire book in the Old Testament. But he also looks at the world around him and says, "You know- sometimes this place just doesn't make any sense. It's unpredictable. Things don't go like they should. Time and chance- they happen to everyone."

And this is hard for us. It is. We want so badly for things to make sense- for someone to be in control, for God to be in control. And sometimes we want this so badly we fool ourselves. Sometimes we're willing to take something that honestly happens by chance, that happens randomly, and we say that it's God- whether we're sure about it or not.

It's easy to do. Especially because most of them have a really bad sense of what randomness and chance actually look like. Did you know that? At Cal Berkeley there's a statistics professor, Deborah Nolan, who does this really cool experiment to give her students a concrete example of what real randomness looks like. Here's how it works. She'll divide her class up into six groups. And with five of the six groups she hands them a quarter. And she asks them to flip the quarter a hundred times and to record the results. And then with the sixth group she tells one person in the group to flip a quarter mentally, in their head, and to write down the results. Then, when each group was done they were to write the results up on the board in no particular order- so you'd wind up with six long lines of h's and t's on the board.

When this was all done, the teacher would come back. And in the interview I heard, just like that she goes up and points out the list that was fake, the one that wasn't random, that was generated by people. Everyone in the class was stunned- how did she do this, how did she know? I certainly didn't know- does anyone have a clue? I thought it might have to do with whether they came out 50/50, but that wasn't it- all the groups fell within an acceptable range. No, you could tell whether they were really random by the runs of heads or tails. The group that was making up the flips up in their head- their list hardly ever goes over 3 in a row- and never over 4 in a row. They felt that wouldn't seem 'random' enough. But the groups that were actually flipping a quarter- the groups that were actually random- they had these long strings of heads and tails in them. In fact one of the groups that was flipping the coin- they had a run of 7 tails in a row. And they said that when they hit four in a row it started to feel weird. And then when they kept

getting tails it felt stranger and stranger. When it hit 7 in a row- one guy said he looked up to see if a unicorn was going to come through the door.

It just felt incredibly special and rare- it certainly didn't feel random to him. It was like the opposite of random.

But in actuality- in a string of 100 flips, having a run of 6 in a row or 7 in a row or even 8 in a row- a statistician will predict this will happen nearly 1 out of 6 times you do the experiment- meaning pretty much every class, which isn't rare at all, is it?

The meaning of this is that random things happen to us all the time- only because we don't have a very good sense for what actual randomness looks like, we mistake things that are happening by chance for the hand of God. See, in the world around us, the world in which time and chance happen to all- things will happen to us that feel strange, that feel like they just *can't* be random, but really, to someone who actually paid attention in their class on probability, isn't that unusual at all.

The lottery is a great example of this. In the paper on Wednesday there was a guy who won the lottery- and of course he mentioned how his winning was God's doing. And to be sure- for that guy to win the odds were really incredible. But if you step back, way back, and you take into consideration the true context, if you take into consideration all the people in the world playing the lottery every single day- it isn't strange that someone wins. In fact, as one statistician I heard said, it would be strange if someone didn't- and in the real context he noted it would be strange if someone somewhere didn't win more than once. And in fact this has happened- a lot.

Evelyn Adams of New Jersey won the lottery once in 1985 and then again in 1986. In Connecticut the employees of the Shuttle Meadow Country Club won twice. In

Massachusetts Phillip Brunelle won the lottery twice in the same weekend. In California Ennis Pool won twice in the same day. And Keith Selix of Waterloo, Iowa has won the lottery not once, not twice, but three times. Yes, to these individuals the odds were very much against them- but in the true context of everyone playing the lottery in all the world- it's expected. It's normal.

And Boomer in the Pew's house that sold in five days in a down market? He feels like that just HAS to be God- that it's too strange? That there's no other explanation? But really- when you consider all of the house sales in the world going on any particular day what would be strange is if that DIDN'T happen now and again. It's not the hand of God- it's the chancy world the way it's made by God.

I know it would be such a relief to be able to point to something- anything- and say that you could know without a doubt that God was behind it. I know. We want certainty. And faith, trust- with all it's not knowing, and uncertainty- well this is just so much harder. Unlike what Paul calls myths and old wife's tales, imagining God running around in a yellow jacket like an agent for Century 21, faith is so much harder. With faith you never get certainty. With faith you always have to say it's how you see it, but you could be wrong. Faith is a lot harder.

But at least what you have, as modest as it is, is real, is true.

You know what I've come away with after all this? I've come away feeling that the way we normally talk about this question- whether we believe in chance *or* we believe in God- I've come away feeling that this is an awful question. It's a false choice.

It's like having to choose between faith and science. Because Ecclesiastes knows what the casinos and the actuarials know- the world is set up with time and chance being the waters within which we swim. And I believe God is here with us- maybe not pulling puppet strings, but walking with us when time and chance rock our world- walking with us whether the test results come back benign or not, or whether our name is on the pink slip or not.

And maybe best of all- when we can admit that everything isn't nailed down, yeah, it's a little frightening- but it's also a little exhilarating, too, isn't it? Knowing that God isn't some kind of control freak but is calling us into an uncertain future where real change can happen, where just because there have always been a certain way, doesn't mean they have to continue that way. It's exciting to be part of a world where God hasn't figured every little thing out but where we, you and I, are called to be co-creators with God- where our thoughts, our actions, our lives really are free, and really do make a difference. **Amen.**