

On December 10, 1968, two Christian giants fell on the same day, Karl Barth and Thomas Merton. Barth was Protestant Reformed, Merton a Catholic monk. Barth was an old man, while Merton was in his prime. Barth was a theologian who focused on a massive system of thought. Merton was a contemplative monk who withdrew from the world to seek the inner life of the Spirit. Karl Barth was probably the best-known theologian of his time. He had confronted Hitler during the War and had inspired resistance to the Nazi cause based on Christian principles. In the Barmen Declaration Barth charged Hitler with attempting to usurp the place of God. At age 82 Barth died of natural causes, old age. With 2 Timothy, one could say that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. Thomas Merton, on the other hand, was a monk living and writing in the Trappist Monastery near Bardstown, Kentucky. Merton's call to a Christian lifestyle had come during the crisis of the Vietnam War. His challenge to the materialism of the age while he lived out his commitment to a life of poverty had caught the imagination of a wide audience. At age fifty-three, he was in his prime. He died in Thailand, attending a conference of monks and had addressed his brothers on the monastic life. He touched a shorted fan in his room and died instantly from electrocution.

I was a seminary graduate student. Dale Moody came into class with a black-bordered death announcement in hand that he had received from the Barth family. Moody had studied with Barth after the War, had stayed in his home, and had become not only a colleague but a friend of the great man. He was proud of the personal announcement in his hand. But the anticipated death of Barth was almost overshadowed by the sudden, unexpected death of Merton. Moody commented that day on the absurdity of life. Although an atheist, the French writer Albert Camus had struck a note common to all of humanity on his repeated message in the theater of the absurd. Life is unpredictable, full of surprises, often leaping from the heights of accomplishment into the vacuum of meaningless despair. It had been seven months since the death of my wife at age twenty-six. The message was personal for me. Yes, life is absurd.

The nineteenth century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard addressed the absurd from a faith perspective. He found in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac the prime example of the struggle to find meaning in the face of absurdity. Abraham lived by the promise that his life fulfillment would come through his son, his only son, Isaac. The covenant with God was a promise of family that would one day become a nation. We can only imagine the horror of the Genesis story when Abraham receives a command to take his son, his only son, Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah and to offer him as a human sacrifice. The story is too horrible to be read by children. Who would want their child to wonder if we might do the same? We want to ignore it, and some have indeed torn it from their Bibles. But it is there, and S.K. saw in it a picture of the reality of life in the real world. Abraham obeys God, and God provides another way. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac becomes the means for him to regain his son Isaac and to find the fulfillment of the promise of God—pure absurdity. For S.K., our only hope is the leap of faith, trust in the eternal God who transcends the absurd moments in life and in death.

***We really don't want to hear it.*** I have found a lot of folks in my life of ministry who do not want to hear the bad stuff. Especially in the church, we live under pressure to ignore as well as to avoid the dark side of life. The word is "never say die," meaning "don't ever admit that life ends." Think happy thoughts. "Smile and the world smiles with you. Cry and you cry alone." Faith is the power of positive thinking. But there is a bigger problem with avoidance than with confrontation. We might avoid other people in trouble, stay away from funerals, and pretend that we are not getting older; but eventually the dark side of life catches up to everyone. Everyone experiences loss. Everyone fails at some point in life. Every last one of us lives between the bounds of birth and death. We can only escape the reality for awhile. Then the absurd faces us.

Ecclesiastes sits in the middle of the Old Testament as a witness to the dark side of life. Qoheleth, the character identified behind this strange book, is a misfit in Jewish life, a lot like Job and very much like the atheist Camus, or the realist Kierkegaard. Jews and Christians have had a long-standing love-hate relationship with the work. Ancient rabbis denounced the writing as contradictory and

misleading to the faith. They resisted its inclusion among inspired writings. Qoheleth never mentions Jahweh, the God of the Jews. He challenges the core idea of the Bible, that God acts in history and that history moves toward fulfillment. In fact, he picks up the Greek idea that history runs in circles: nothing new under the sun. No one likes to hear his repeated refrain: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The Hebrew word translated *vanity* is literally *vapor*. Can you imagine a book of the Bible repeating the charge that everything—life, time, faith, work, play, love, hope, etc.—everything is empty, meaningless nothing? One interpreter called him a depressed workaholic, another a preacher of joy. Most think of him as a hopeless pessimist, while others think of him as an unflappable optimist who maintains that there is nothing better to do than eat, drink, and be merry. One has characterized his work as "Theology When Everything Is Out of Control" (*Interpretation*, 55, No 3, p. 38).

Times in life and entire epochs of history leave us with a sense that no one is in control. Ecclesiastes is usually identified with the Greek period in Jewish life. Under the Ptolemies, life was extremely hard, not unlike the attitudes that emerged in the World Wars era of Barth or the Vietnam War era of Merton. His brief moments of optimism may not be positive at all. Some think that he is engaging in distraction from the pain of life with some opium dream of a different world.

However much we dislike the picture of life we get from Qoheleth, Camus, and Kierkegaard, we need to face reality. We might not like a diagnosis of cancer, but we are not likely to treat a malignant tumor with positive thinking and wake up one morning to find that it is gone. Neither will we learn to cope with a death in the family by pretending it did not happen. One of the things I don't like about the Bible, but I have learned to appreciate is the tendency to plow through the dark side of life. Biblical stories tend to tell the truth about people and nations warts and all. The Gospels uncover the ugly death of Jesus on a Roman cross in spite of the challenge it presents to a pleasant faith.

Realism is not the sole property of scientists. We may be the only church on planet earth today that has a quotation from Stephen Hawking on the front of the order of worship. Hawking is identified by some as the new Einstein. He plays games with the word *God* that make you think that he may have a religious thought in the back of his head, but the introduction by Carl Sagan to his book *A Brief History of Time* assures us that he is only speaking of God to uncover the absence of God from the universe. Probably without intention, his description of the world after Einstein's general theory of relativity, opens up a world of possibility for some of us that reaches far beyond what the Bible writers could see in their time. His description of time connected to space makes the idea of an Eternal God not only credible to some of us, the hope for a caring God becomes the alternative to despair.

**What time is it?** Since Einstein, Hawking believes that it is all about time. What is the meaning of time? Why can't we foresee the future like we can remember the past? Is there another dimension of reality, as suggested by the string theory, that sustains a parallel universe?

Qoheleth also thought it was all about time, only he focused on timing. Time is about knowing the right moment. His poetry on time is commonly recited at funerals to remind us that there is a time to die, the fact of life that none of us want to acknowledge. The actor Charles Coburn once said that the key to acting is timing. It is knowing when to speak and when to pause, synchronizing your motions to fit your words. Maybe that is the meaning of life implied by Ecclesiastes. Investors in the stock market would agree as would the professional gamblers in Los Vegas. If you just knew how the dice will fall or what card is next in the deck, you could live on top of the world. Or, as Stephen Hawking notes, if you could remember the future you could make a killing in the markets.

With all of that on the table, we face the truth that no one knows the future. Jesus acknowledged his ignorance of the end. He had no interest in the prediction games that function as religion today. The one piece of the puzzle that comes through in Ecclesiastes as positive is the God who transcends all of time, past and future.

Paul addressed the Christians in Rome, in crisis times, when a pagan cruel government controlled the known world and everyone's life was under the shadow of a Roman Emperor's whim. He wrote: "you know what time it is." Did they? Perhaps they did not have an adequate grasp of history and certainly they did not know the future, but they had centered their lives in Christ so that the meaning of life depended not on what happens today or tomorrow nearly so much as the ultimate outcome in

the mind of God.