

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"LIFE IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN . . ."

Text: "Again I saw that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong . . . but, time and chance happen to them all." Ecclesiastes 9:11

I always have the feeling that something important is going on when I get to the book of Ecclesiastes. Koheleth, the author, has long been a "friend" of mine. He is honest. I like a man who tells me what he knows: "I have tried everything under the sun, and I have found that all of it is vanity." Life is tough. All you have to do, he says, is to fear God and keep God's Commandments. . . . But meanwhile, don't expect too much. It isn't there. He speaks to the hard and disappointing moments in our lives.

Ecclesiastes is deep. Much of the Bible is told in simple little stories, which even a child can understand. They are not that simple, but you can lock into them at any level. With Ecclesiastes you have to stretch. Here is a man who has looked in the heart of the Universe, and comes back to tell you about it. He will not settle for easy answers.

"I wish I could tell you (Koheleth is speaking) that everything will work out fine. I wish I could say that everything will end happily. . . . But, frankly, I am not always too sure of that." Once in a while you have to walk out on the edge . . . what Paul Tillich called "The Boundary." If you can stare into the abyss at the heart of things and come back smiling, you can appreciate the message of Koheleth.

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In Chapter Nine he writes: "Enjoy life all the days of your life. Whatever you find to do, do it with

all your might; for there is no work, or thought, or knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going." In other words, you only go around once, give and get all the gusto you can . . . beyond that, who knows? Our text puts it into a nutshell: "I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor is the battle to the strong, but time and chance happen to them all." Oh boy . . . 'tis true.

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Time and chance happen to them all. They do. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. Good people suffer, just like the others. Like a friend of mine in trouble, went up to Rochester to the Mayo Clinic. He asked, "Why did this happen to me?" The doctor said, "I don't know . . . I guess it's just your turn." "Your turn" . . . what goes around comes around. Time and chance happen to them all.

Is it fair? Of course not! Some people seem to have far more than their share . . . their turn seems to come up far too frequently. Is God up to some kind of trick? No . . . but keep listening. One day at Muirfield at the British Open, the rough was so high, a couple of caddies got lost. The reporter asked Jack Nicklaus if he thought the course was fair. He said, "I didn't think golf was intended to be fair. It's intended to be a challenge!"

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Today's sermon idea came from an article by Hugh

Thomson Kerr, Jr., in the prestigious magazine, Theology Today. A few years ago his lead editorial told of how he was planning to go to a conference in Tucson. They packed up the car in Princeton and set off for Arizona. Some difficult things happened to his family on the way. They ended up in the Emergency Room. They had to be flown back to New Jersey. They hired a driver to bring their car, but he got into an accident, and he totaled the car.

Dr. Kerr wrote: "Isn't it peculiar that I, who all my life had preached to people about trusting in the Will of God, was struggling with why He had chosen me for all this." His faith began to falter. He began to talk to himself, and he sought help from some friends. This sermon was born when one trusty classmate advised: 'Don't worry about it, Tim, life is what happens when . . . you are planning something else!'" Indeed. Life is what happens when you are planning something else.

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When I was a boy in the early 1940's, the young men and women who were leaving school, then as now, were planning to go off to college, or to start work in the family business, or whatever. Then December 7, 1941 came along, and their lives were changed forever. Life is what happened to them and their loved ones as they were planning something else . . . and it was three, four, five years before they returned, and . . . some of them never came back at all.

Closer to home, when I graduated from Peabody High in 1953, I had a friend who was chosen "Most Likely To Succeed." But, the first semester he was in college, his father suddenly died. His mother and brother and sisters needed him, so he took a job and leveled off his future at the age of twenty-one. He never really recovered to full speed. Life is what happens when. . . .

We all know those who have faced illness, or uncertainty, or goodness knows what. Sometimes it was an accident on the highway. Sometimes a

divorce . . . sometimes family violence, sometimes alcohol . . . life is what happens when you are planning something else. And, the very frailties of the human body catch up to you, like one of my Fort Lauderdale friends says, "My longevity is catching up on me!"

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The Bible knows all about it: like Adam and Eve, and the first family. It was a great debacle in the Garden. Adam blamed Eve (wives always get blamed); Eve blamed the serpent. So God threw them out. . . . But after a while, they got things going again. They had two wonderful sons. As the boys grew, they thought they would sit back and let them take over the family business. . . . But, their sons got into a horrid fight (that happens in families and in family businesses). The one son killed the other one; and the parents never lived a totally happy day after that. Life for them was what happened when they were planning something else.

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There was Abraham (I love him.) He was moving along up in Haran, near Mt. Hermon, having a good time. He and Sarah were on "Cloud 9." He loved her more than anything in all the world. They had servants, riches, and an established community. But mainly it was easy, because Terah, his father, took care of everything.

But then, one day his father died. It does not tell you the details, but Genesis 12 opens: *"The voice of the Lord came to Abraham, saying: 'Go up the valley to a land that I will show you.'"*

"Where??"

"Up the valley."

"To where?"

"Go! And I will show you. I have some new plans for you."

It was time for a change. It seemed so sad. But, Abraham went. A new nation was born; and all the generations of the earth would be blessed.

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God works in mysterious ways. What is hidden will one day be made known. It has to do with freedom. We are not puppets on a string. But now and then according to the Bible, God seems to break through that freedom and commandeers us for important battles. I suppose any of the Biblical heroes could have said no. But mostly when God looked them in the eye and spoke directly, they responded.

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There was Moses. He had killed a man when he was young. But, God forgave him, and it all began to work out. He found a lovely wife named Zipporah. They had two sons . . . nice Jewish boys. Out in Midian they were doing fine, thank you. He was working for his father-in-law, even getting along! That's pretty good.

Then, one day, while Moses was minding his own business, an old bush in the desert caught on fire. "Go down to Egypt, Moses. . . ." the bush said. "Who is that? What did you say?" "Go down to Egypt! This is the Lord." "Not me, Lord! I am on the 'Most Wanted' list down there. I can't go to Egypt! Besides, I have Zipporah and the boys to take care of. I am working as hard as I want to work. And anyway, I stutter . . . I ssttutter! Remember?" God said: "*Moses, life is what happens when you are planning something else. It's my turn to take over your life . . . I need you. For goodness sakes, go! Aaron will be your voice. I will be your courage. And we will persuade Pharaoh to let my people go.*" He went and they did, and Pharaoh let God's people go, though not without a struggle as you recall.

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And David . . . now, some of you are married a second time. You will understand this a little better than some others. For David and Bathsheba, it was the second time around. They fell in love one day, at first sight, even though both were married. There was a baby born to that new marriage. That

was nice. They could enjoy a child of their own, together . . . but . . . the baby took ill and died. How sad. Sure, they overcame it, (God gives all of us a second chance). David went on to be a great King. Another of their sons, Solomon, became the next King. But, forever there was a memory of all that might have been. . . .

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Then, to move it closer to home . . . Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen on the Galilean Sea. I have been there: beautiful lake, quiet little towns, lots of open country. People are nicer there, and you can leave your doors open. You know what I mean -- Palm Beach, the way it used to be. . . . They loved the water and their seaside town, time to talk, time to loaf around. But, one day, as they were mending their nets, along came Jesus Christ. Without warning, He said, "*Come and follow me.*" "Where?" "*Wherever, just come . . . I will make you fishers of men. Your days on the lake are over. You will face abuse and rejection, but in the end, it will be worth it.*"

By the way . . . have you, here at the Chapel, ever sacrificed anything for Christ? Has your faith ever cost you anything great? Not in money so much as in time and energy. Have you really surrendered yourself and everything you have to the Lord? In the end it will be worth it.

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Lastly, there was one Palestinian who had it made. He wanted to be the wealthiest man in all Palestine. I knew a man like that once. No matter how much he had, he wanted more. "Why?" I asked. He said, "My father told me once I would never amount to anything. Now, I'm showing him." I said, "For Pete's sake, relax." He didn't.

So the Biblical one built a bigger barn, stored more and more grain. Hurrah for him . . . but nothing can erase the horror of those final words where it

says in Matthew: *"God said, 'Thou fool! This night your soul will be required of thee.'"* And it was.

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Which leaves our Lord . . . who ever had more right to a perfect, happy life than He? And what happened? He was home in Nazareth, taking care of his mother, and God said: *"Time's up. We are leaving here."*

"To where, Lord?"

"Just come. I will show you. They will be mean to you, you will suffer abuse and be rejected . . . for my sake. In the end they will hang you on a cross."

So he wandered in the wilderness in the towns and cities, until it was time for Calvary: "Why Lord? Why me?"

"Some day I will explain it to you, just say it's our turn."

Life is what happens when God makes other plans.

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It's time to end. But, we need a little more, as we turn toward home. My professor of preaching said to his student 35 years ago, "Now that you have lavishly laid out the problem . . . what do you want us to do about it?" Great question. Here's my answer.

1. One, we have to realize that it is intended to be this way: time and chance happen to us all. Life is not laid out on a computerized map, which takes us directly from one point to another. What was true with our Lord is also true with us: at each intersection of the road, we need to pause in thought and prayer, to say "Lord, show me the way to go next." There are markers to point the way and people to direct us, but the surprises of life, good and bad, are part of the plan of God.

2. Two, we need to keep on going anyway. If life is not worth living, what else are you going to do with it? What is hidden now will one day be made known. You can count on it. In AA they

sometimes say, "Fake it 'til you make it." Keep believing, and it will soon come true.

3. Three, you need to be sure that you are following the one who knows the way. In strange and unfamiliar territory you need a guide who knows the way. We lived for a couple of years in the ancient Kingdom of Fife in Scotland. Little painted road signs were usually there at the crossroads to tell you which way to go, say, to Anstruther, or Dundee, or Kingsbarns . . . once in a while however, the mischievous young boys of Fife would play a trick and turn the signs around. (That can happen in life, too.) The signs pointed Dundee to the south and Crail to the north, and they were really the opposite.

But, in my car one day was a local who knew the way. "No matter what it says," he said, "turn north to go to Dundee." He knew the way. I pray God you and I will learn to follow. Christ knows the way.

So, wherever you are . . . take a moment, before we go: say a little silent prayer, for yourself. Let the others wait . . . this one is for you. You have your plans, but it could be that Christ is ready to knock on your door with something new. Re-dedicate yourself, pray something like: "Dear Lord Jesus, I give my life to you, again. Take it and use it as you will. Take anything and everything you need. I will follow you. Give me peace within, and joy without. Make me worthy of the One who died for me. In all the changes of time and chance in my life, still I live in your time, I live in your power. I hope to live in Christ's presence. . . ." For now and evermore. Amen.

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