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Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, ESV

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Mark 14:26–31, ESV

²⁶ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ ²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” ²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” ³⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” ³¹ But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same.

Rocking in the Kingdom of God.

When our children were very small, we went to Ireland. I delivered a paper at an academic conference there, and afterwards, we drove around the country. We had some fun adventures there. The condo we rented in Dublin had an artificial fireplace, which consisted of a huge electric coil that, when turned on, glowed red and created a lot of heat. One night I turned it on to entertain the kids, but about a half hour later, the power in the entire unit went out. It turned out that the

“fireplace” had overtaxed the electrical system. I walked over to the unit next door and asked the woman who lived there where I could find the breaker box. She said there were no breakers. I said okay, where is the fuse box? She said there were no fuses. To this day, I am blown away that this sort of construction was legal, but the entire building was hardwired to the neighborhood power source, without any breakers or fuses. One morning we were trying to hurry out of the condo to catch a train to go sightseeing. I was running around the condo, trying to find Isabelle, who was three years old. I was calling out that I needed to tie her shoes for her before we left, and she needed to come out from wherever she was so I could tie them, damn it. I found her in the entryway, slowly, painstakingly, and successfully tying her own shoes – at the age of three. Sometimes you just really need to keep up with your big sister.

We had the normal hiccups, too, the sorts of things that happen on vacations. One sunny day we split up as we toured Dublin on foot. Martina was with me, holding my hand. Isabelle and Julien were in a stroller with Wendy. We agreed to meet at a specific intersection. Martina and I went to that intersection, but the others weren't there. This was before cell phones, so we couldn't call each other. We walked up and down the entire street, over and over. Martina was an incredible trooper. She walked for miles with me as we went in circles

around the area, looking for the rest of the family. I was getting very afraid that something had happened to them, and I was doing my best to be calm and relaxed with Martina, so that I wouldn't scare her. Finally, I found a cop and told him I was supposed to meet my wife at a particular intersection, but she hadn't been there. He smiled and told me that this was a common point of confusion for tourists; there were two streets with almost identical names. He told us to just walk a block over to the other street with the same name, and then go a block up to the intersection where we had agreed to meet. Sure enough, Martina and I found Wendy minutes later, to our huge relief. Another time, we were on the grounds of Trinity College in Dublin, walking along a cobblestone covered path. Martina found a segment of chain connecting two posts and sat on it, using it as a swing. I told her to get off, that she could hurt herself. A moment later, she decided to disobey me, then spilled backward and sliced open her scalp on the sharp edge of a cut cobblestone. She was bleeding profusely. I picked her up in my arms and we ran to a nearby commercial area. We found a pharmacy. The plan was to buy some alcohol and bandages. But the pharmacist saw what was happening, came out from behind his counter, and patched her up for us. I'll tell one more story about this trip in a moment.

Our first passage is from Ecclesiastes. According to the text, the author is Qoheleth, which is not a person's name. In Hebrew the word means "*one who speaks to an assembly*", and it probably identifies the author as a teacher. The author also identifies himself as the son of King David, as well as a king himself, which would mean that the author would have to be King Solomon. But as we have seen before, ancient writers often attributed works to famous people in order to show respect, so we cannot be sure who wrote it. The writing in the book is, however, the sort of writing we might expect of him, given what we know of King Solomon. The book shows a very scholarly knowledge of the Wisdom literature, and Solomon was closely associated with the works of the Sages. In the book, traditional, theologically based wisdom statements are juxtaposed with very theologically jaded, negative statements about his experiences in life. Ecclesiastes was written around 250 B.C. The book was clearly written over a number of years and it is a sort of philosophical autobiography. The book tells the reader that morality should indeed be unconditional and not based on any perceived rewards from God – but the writer does not appear to believe that humans hold any exalted place in God's universal order, and he also does not seem to believe that God will punish evil. There is no question that the theology in Ecclesiastes is difficult to comprehend. It is also filled with numerous divergent

themes, making the logic of the Book hard to follow. One theme does come through clearly: it is hard to find purpose in human life, and so we should just take life as it comes and try to enjoy it. This may be jaded and certainly does not reflect Christian beliefs, but it does make one good point. God does want us to enjoy life and not get caught up in the chaos of human society. Here is a line from our quote: ²⁶ *For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.* If you do follow God, if you listen to God's teachings, then in return, God gives you wisdom, knowledge, and joy. Joy. We should indeed enjoy life. Further, the beginning of our passage says this: ²⁴ *There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.* The point is that God wants us to even enjoy our work. We should relax and find pleasure even when we are trying to earn a living.

Consider our second quote. It's from the Gospel of Mark. It's a scene that we are all familiar with. Jesus is going to die soon. He is about to go pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has a difficult conversation with the person who should be the most loyal to him, Peter. Here is our quote: ²⁶ *And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.* ²⁷ *And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'* ²⁸ *But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."*

²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” ³⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” Jesus is telling Peter, even though Peter cannot believe it, that he will deny Jesus three times. Peter will crumble under the threat of being arrested and charged along with Jesus. This is perhaps the darkest thing that Jesus ever had to say to Peter. Now, look at what they did before having this very famous conversation: ²⁶ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Before they spoke, they sang a hymn. The word hymn in biblical Greek is *humnos*, and it means to praise or to celebrate. But to understand the true context of this quote, we need to look at what happens just before they sing this hymn and then they go off to the Mount of Olives. They had just finished Passover, the last supper, the final meal that Jesus and his Apostles would share. A traditional way to end Passover was by singing a hymn. The Jews did just what we do; we blend music with our religious rituals. In this case the hymn was meant to lift everyone up, to raise their spirits just before going back into the world. It isn't stated explicitly what hymn they sang, but traditionally, at the close of Passover, they would sing Psalms 115 to 118 as a single hymn. Let's look at the last part of this, Psalm 118, most likely the last thing the Apostles sang together before Jesus went off to his betrayal and execution. This Psalm thanks God for

centuries of protection from enemies that had continuously tried to destroy the Israelite people. Here is just a bit of it:

*⁵ When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD;
he brought me into a spacious place.*

*⁶ The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?*

We come here each Sunday to praise God, to enjoy the support of our fellow believers, and to energize us for the week to come. We know that there are difficult things we will have to face. Perhaps a chronic illness, a problem with our family life, or money problems. We also know that at any time, a terrible tragedy could strike. But we know that the world of people can never break us. We know this because we come here each Sunday to renew our relationship with God. We know that God is always with us and within us. One thing we do during our services is sing hymns. The power of music lifts us up and carries us through the week – no matter what happens.

Let me get back to our vacation in Dublin. There was one more thing that happened. One warm evening, we put the kids to bed and then went to sit outside behind our firetrap condo. We were in comfortable chairs, each of us holding a beer. We relaxed in the setting sun, talking softly, happy to know that

God had blessed us with such incredible children. Then, suddenly, we started to hear loud music. It was a rock band and I recognized it as a U2 song. Someone was playing some very loud rock'n'roll. Then, we both realized at the same time that this was live music. It turned out that we were very close to the Dublin Zoo and the rock band U2 was holding a concert there. It was incredible. We had a free concert right there in the backyard of our condo while our kids slept. It turned out to be a long concert and we listened until hours after dark. We went to sleep that night, after checking the kids, lifted up by that music.

So, that is my message for today. We aren't here to suffer every day, to do nothing but work and worry, to live only for that future promise of an eternal life. We are here to do just what Jesus did. That is, to live lives of empathy and forgiveness, to think of others before we think of ourselves. But God also wants us to come together as people of faith and love God together, to sing together, to leave here feeling not duty-bound, but rather, joyous. We are to enjoy our lives. We are to spend time with children, grandchildren, friends, neighbors, and fellow believers. We are to relax from time to time and look out at the beautiful world that God has given us as a temporary home. We are to understand that grim things will happen and that terrible traumas will also occur occasionally. But

remember that Psalm. Remember that hymn that tells us that we do not have to be afraid of what can happen in the world of people:

*⁵ When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD;
he brought me into a spacious place.*

*⁶ The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?*

The next morning after our U2 concert, the kids were up early, excited about going sight-seeing some more. We were a bit tired from having stayed up late enjoying that free concert that God gave us without warning. But we all had a good time that day. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for meeting us here every Sunday morning. We thank you for lifting us up with prayer and scripture and song. We thank you for leading us out of here every Sunday morning prepared to face the week, the good and the bad, the grim and joyous. We know that mere mortals can do nothing to us, that you will protect us by always giving us your kingdom to live in, no matter what happens. God, we ask that you bring the joy of your presence to all people, especially those who are suffering, who are hungry, who are trying to find new lives after leaving brutal countries filled with poverty and violence. We do know how blessed we are – and we are deeply thankful for this. Amen.