

Both Sides Now
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Is anyone here a Joni Mitchell fan? Did you see her surprise performance at the Newport Folk Festival last Sunday? I saw the recording of her singing *Both Sides Now*, and it made me cry.

Those words that she first wrote in her early 20s had a special irony and poignancy at 78, seven years after she relearned to speak and play the guitar following a brain aneurysm in 2015.

For me, there's something about that song that resonates with all our readings today. I think that if you were going to put the verses we have from Ecclesiastes in the form of a song, Joni's *Both Sides Now* would do the trick. (The Byrds already took the section about everything having a purpose under Heaven.)

Where Qoheleth says, "I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind," I hear Joni sing -- *I've looked at life from both sides now, from win and lose and still somehow; it's life's illusions I recall. I really don't know life at all.*

While the typical translation of Ecclesiastes has Qoheleth punctuating just about every other sentence with Vanity of Vanities, the word that is used in the Hebrew, *hebed*, is actually closer to the mist or vapor that causes a mirage, or illusion.

It's life's illusions Qoheleth recalls. Not so much life's egocentrism – though that's in there. But it's more like the tendency to be duped or fooled when you put your faith in the wrong thing. When you realize that thing you took for granted was all a mirage.

I always thought that the narrator of Ecclesiastes was something of a scold or a misanthrope, maybe Solomon on a really, really bad day. But Scripture scholar Knut Martin Heim suggests that Qoheleth was neither king nor teacher, but more a keynote speaker, a performer doing the local talk show circuit in the 3rd century BCE.¹ A lot is lost on us, since we're not an audience made of Judeans oppressed by the Ptolemaic Greeks who have taken over Egypt. But to Heim, the author of Ecclesiastes comes off like a stand-up comedian, delivering a sarcastic and ironic shtick about the problems his people are facing.

To take him at face value is sort of like taking satirist Andy Borowitz literally.

Heim says that when Qoheleth talks about all the lousy things that are happening "under the sun," he's making a veiled reference to his oppressors in Egypt -- I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, -- wink, wink, nudge, nudge, get it? Under the Sun, Rah, get it?

Well his audience would have. And behind all the criticism about life under the sun, they would also have heard him telling them to resist their oppressors' false gods and empty promises and to hang on to the one they can really trust, which is their God. He's telling them to hold on to who they are, don't believe the hype, it's a mirage.

¹ Heim, Knut Martin. *Ecclesiastes* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries) (p. 2). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

The question for us today is: who or what do we put our faith in during these unsettling times? Paul raises the same question to the Colossians today. Jesus brings it up as well in Luke's gospel. Are you going to put your faith in God, in Christ, or in something else?

Putting faith in things is an essentially human trait. We might think that it belongs in the religious realm, but really it's an all-purpose practice, essential to who we are as imaginative and hopeful and creative creatures. We have faith in the people that we give our attention to, in those we love. We have faith in political and economic and scientific systems, in the patterns and practices we live by, in the social media we consume.

And we know, especially in this time of strange and baffling beliefs, that uncritical faith in foolish things can completely dupe us; we can be easily manipulated as a species. Vanity of vanities.

And that is what Qoheleth and Paul and Jesus are all warning against. Beware of putting your faith in the things that will ultimately dupe you. Beware of the voice that says you don't need the God of love, you don't need other people, you're best off hoarding the earth's treasures and keeping it for yourself and maybe your family members and few select friends.

We are reaping the whirlwind of this kind of self-centered faith: the refusal to take responsibility for climate change has numbered our days; the inability to work for the common good in a global pandemic has made infected bodies Petrie dishes for new variants, violent faith in a Big Lie about who won the presidential election has left our democracy hanging by a thread.

The alternative of course is disillusionment. Admitting that we really don't know life at all. And that may just be the beginning of wisdom.

I got a taste of this a few weeks ago on the Colorado River, during my summer vacation. Jess and I spent a week in Moab, Utah, where his sister and brother-in-law work for the national park service. On two occasions, we went floating down stretches of the river on inflatable boats provided by their wonderful group of friends. The sky was incredibly blue, graced with those rows and flows of angel hair that Joni sings about. The red rock canyons on either side of the river were breathtaking. A family of native big horn sheep made an appearance at the water's edge. Our river-dampened sun shirts kept us cool, and largely unaware that it was over 100 degrees.

"This is my heaven", one of my fellow rafters told me.

But when you're taking in the scenery with people who protect wildlife, study geology, tend to vulnerable native plants and have watched this precious water source dry up over the decades, the illusion of a pristine wilderness evaporates as well. The Colorado River is the source of water for 40 million people in seven states in the U.S., and it is rapidly dying.² More than 20 years of climate-related drought, as well as overuse by agriculture and development, has depleted its water so much that it no longer reaches Mexico. Its reservoirs at Lake Mead and Lake Powell are at their lowest in 30 years, and soon will not be able to supply the hydroelectric power they were built to produce, let alone the water they stored.

² <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2022-06-20/as-colorado-river-reservoirs-drop-states-urged-to-act-now#:~:text=The%20Colorado%20has%20long%20been,declined%20nearly%2020%25%20since%202000.>

Unless of course people completely rethink how they share the water supply, and let go of the illusion that their water claims are more important than every one else's. Protecting the little water that is left requires rethinking where that treasure should go.

It means undoing a great vanity among vanities. It requires embracing disillusionment.

A well-formed faith is not afraid of disillusionment. It is not afraid to find out that its assumptions are off base. Healthy faith is humble. It tries not to kid itself and fall prey to perfectionism or idolatry.

Paul describes living in Christ as taking off an old garment and putting on a new one, allowing old practices to die so that new life may replace them. And I would say a long life requires many a wardrobe change, many a shedding of layers. When disillusionment is practiced artfully, wrong-headed convictions will die at its hands, to be replaced by wisdom in new clothes. That practice is essential to the life of Christ.

This holy disillusionment happens when we take responsibility for sinful practices and turn away from them. Or when we discover we have been unwittingly participating in and benefitting from systems of privilege and greed, and then decide to dismantle them. It happens when we admit that the hurts and traumas in our lives are too deep to ignore, and we reach out for help.

Holy disillusionment. It nurtures divine faith and inspired action.

"Do not lie to one another", Paul says, "seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free.

Disillusionment often requires us to undo, even reverse, the old, misleading categories. In Paul's day, Greek's hated Jews, who looked down on pagans, who spurned all who didn't speak Greek, who in turn had no kind words for Scythians; a chasm lay between the free and the enslaved.³ The new life Paul called the community at Colossae to required it to strip itself of the illusion of superiority and to put on Christ instead.

Allowing Christ to be our all in all requires a practice of emptying out, of disillusioning. It demands that we actively row against a current of illusions, mirages, vanities. Faith in God, the Gospels tell us, requires that we love, not simply as individuals but as an interconnected body -- one whose members keep the faith for one another when individual wells run dry.

Such love at times will be heart breaking in a world so hell-bent on its vanities. But I think it's that everyday faith in a disillusioning God and everyday membership in an honest community that will help us to resist despair and to offer hope.

Or as Joni would put it: There's something lost and something gained by living every day.

Amen.

³ Muddiman, John; Barton, John. *The Pauline Epistles (Oxford Bible Commentary)* (p. 212). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.