

**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • July 31, 2022**



**THE SCRIPTURE**  
**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

*These are the words of the Quester, David's son, and king in Jerusalem: Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That's what the Quester says.] There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke. What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth. The sun comes up and the sun goes down, then does it again, and again—the same old round. The wind blows south, the wind blows north. Around and around and around it blows, blowing this way, then that—the whirling, erratic wind. All the rivers flow into the sea, but the sea never fills up. The rivers keep flowing to the same old place, and then start all over and do it again. Everything's boring, utterly boring— no one can find any meaning in it. Boring to the eye, boring to the ear. What was will be again, what happened will happen again.*

*There's nothing new on this earth. Year after year it's the same old thing. Does someone call out, "Hey, this is new"? Don't get excited—it's the same old story. Nobody remembers what happened yesterday. And the things that will happen tomorrow? Nobody'll remember them either. Don't count on being remembered.*

**THE MESSAGE**  
**“Then Sings My Soul: We Didn’t Start the Fire”**  
**Mark Briley**

[Editor’s Note: It would be helpful to watch/listen to “We Didn’t Start the Fire” by Billy Joel, found on YouTube at this link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDPnsTRAvIM>

Is that exhausting or what?!? 118 significant political, cultural, scientific, and sporting events between 1949 and 1989, for the most part in chronological order.

I’m going to do a public health-check with Nollie in this moment to be sure he is still breathing. When he knew this song was next up on the series list, he said, “*I’m not sure I can handle it!*” As part of an assignment in college, he had to memorize, and lip sync this song. Nollie – you good?

It’s one of the more famous songs in our summer series, *Then Sings My Soul*, as we seek sacred hope in secular music. While Nollie may be the very few among us who could sing along with the verses, most everyone can sing along with the chorus. Most of us just go, “*Da da da da da da da, da da da da da da da da...*” And then “*We didn’t start the fire...*”. In fact, it’s because of that basic melody that Bill Joel says he doesn’t really care for the song all that much.

Apparently, somebody tried to sue him for the similarities of the melodies of the verse used in another song and Billy Joel, who is one of the great song writers of a generation, scoffed and said, “*Really? I had to steal one of the most boring melodic lines ever?*” And you remember how it goes, right? Sing the “*Da das*” with me: (“*Da da da da da da da, da da da da da da da da...*”). Truth is... Billy (*I think we can be on a first name basis with Billy Joel this morning*).<sup>1</sup>



The truth is... Billy wrote this song after being a bit offended by a young musician he bumped into in the recording studio. It was actually a friend of Sean Lennon. Sean Lennon is the son of John and Yoko and Billy had some connection over time with their family so was talking with them when Sean’s friend says, “*Yeah. I just turned 21.*”

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<sup>1</sup> [www.billyjoel.com](http://www.billyjoel.com). Fun facts about the song and Joel’s experience of writing it are easily found across the internet. I utilized various sources, but this site gets you to the heart of who Billy Joel is and what he’s up to right now.

*It's such a terrible time to be 21.*" Billy who had just turned forty himself said, "*Oh yeah. It's tough turning 21. I remember Vietnam, drugs,*" and he rambled off some other things. The young man says, "*Well, it's different for you because you were a kid in the 50's and everyone knows nothing happened in the 50's.*"

How many of you who lived in the 1950s are also now offended? You can understand then how Billy Joel felt, and he sat and started to justify the hardships of the world not only in his childhood but in all his 40 years. So, he launches in "*Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray...*" He's got his pencil burning up the paper: "*South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio, Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, television, North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe.*" See kid? Not all roses for me either. Which leads me to wonder, "*Does every generation believe they've got it harder than every other generation?*"

I mean, why else do we have the quippy throwbacks, "*Well, when I was a kid...*" and the likes of "*We walked miles to school and uphill both ways.*" Or today's generation may say, "*You have no idea of the anxiety growing up in a social media age.*" If you've ever said, "*Kids these days,*" or "*Ugh. Old people.*" then you might fall into this camp whether you want to or not.

I think nobody wants people to think they didn't have to struggle or battle or go through hard things; to work hard to get where they are now. And so, we start the ramble just like Billy Joel... "*We didn't have cell phones. We didn't have the Internet.*" To be truthful, there were harder times for some than others. I remember someone throwing out a question to a group once that was something to the effect of, "*If you could go back and live in a previous era of history, which era would you choose.*" A person of color in the group said, "*You know, there are not a lot of eras in history that would be that friendly to me.*"

So, the checklist of history – is it healthy? Is it formative? If nothing else – whether it's you or me or Billy Joel, it puts us on a quest of discovery. *This* happened. *That* happened. What does it all mean?

This led me straight to the book of Ecclesiastes, which is found in the string of Wisdom Literature in the Old or more aptly named, First Testament. If you open your Bible to the middle, you'll land in the book of Psalms. Fun fact – with some wiggle room from translation to translation, the middle verse of the 31,102 verses in Scripture (*which is an even number, yada, yada yada*) but is essentially Psalm 103:1-2 which says, "*Bless the Lord all my soul and all that is within me.*" So... open to the middle of your Bible, take a right where you'll find the Proverbs next door and then Ecclesiastes – which is a Greek word typically translated as "*the Preacher*" or "*the Teacher*" but as Eugene

Peterson notes: *“giving voice to what is so basic among humans throughout history, I have translated it “the Quester.”*

Who is this Quester? The writer is really unknown though the opening words suggest it is attributed to David’s son, Solomon. Now... if you haven’t tinkered around the Bible all that much, you may not be all that familiar with Ecclesiastes. That’s understandable. It may sound familiar to you because you’ve probably been to a wedding or funeral where Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, was read – *“There’s a time for every matter under heaven,”* it says. It’s why The Byrd’s wrote and released their hit song decades ago, *“To everything,”* what? *“Turn, turn, turn... there is a season,”* what? *“Turn, turn, turn. And a time to every purpose, under heaven.”*

It’s a great verse and serves a great purpose but there’s a reason most of the rest of Ecclesiastes is never recited at weddings or funerals or in sermons – it’s all pretty much grump city talk. It starts right from the beginning: *“Smoke, nothing but smoke. That’s what the Quester says. There’s nothing to anything – it’s all smoke. What’s there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes – its business as usual for old planet earth.”* It goes on!!! *“Everything’s boring, utterly boring – no one can find any meaning in it. Boring to the eye, boring to the ear. What was will be again, what happened will happen again. There’s nothing new on this earth. Year after year it’s the same old thing. Does someone call out, “Hey, this is new”? Don’t get excited – it’s the same old story.”* Can you imagine reading that at the wedding and then being like, *“Do you take this boring, nothing’s changed, same ol’ dude to be your husband?”* Much less inspiring than, *“Love is patient, love is kind,”* right?

But this sentiment of, *“It’s all meaningless”* is pervasive, isn’t it? We look at the news and the division and politics and we think, *“It’s never going to change.”* And we put our walls up and start the hater talk and social media tells us to go for it, so we do and then it’s just noise, noise, noise. Where is the Church in all this noise? That’s a good question.

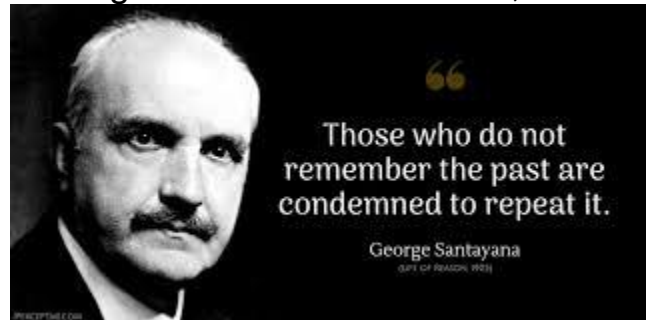
I heard some interesting stats and commentary this week about the Church in America. Some 42% -- some say as many as 60% -- of pastors have wanted to flat out quit in the last year. And 62% of pastors said they are willing to call the church to radical change in order to be a church of relevance in the future while they believe only 10% of their congregants will be up for the change. Yikes.

And what does the Quester say? *“Does someone call out, “Hey, this is new? Don’t get excited – it’s the same old story.”* Yet it’s the same old story that people are fleeing from. Another commentary on the state of religion in America said, *“People demand to know your POV – your point of view and won’t trust you unless you’re clear about that*

*but then will not trust you or even quit you if your POV doesn't align top to bottom with their POV."* It's at this point where I'd like today's secular song with sacred hope to be R.E.M.'s *"Shiny happy people holding hands."* But... no one submitted that song, so we're hanging with the Quester and Billy Joel instead.

What are we to do about this? Does all seem hopeless? Billy Joel said in an interview about the song, *"No matter how much you try, the world is going to be a mess."*

That's disheartening. Chilling with the Quester in these downer verses may be good when we just need to rant or vent or get some negative vibes off our chest, but at what point do we make the turn, turn, turn? Maybe part of the answer comes in one of the 118 people/places or things that Billy names in the song. He includes the name, George Santayana, in the second verse of the list. Santayana is credited with saying, *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."* Could this be the sacred hope in this secular song? *Remember. Learn.*



*Grow.* I think it's a call to clear the air. When we bottle up our frustrations and our heartaches, it has nowhere to go but inside until we implode. Billy Joel needed to clear the air. *"I've been through some stuff, too, kid. See?"*

The Quester needed to rant in order to move on. We hem-haw around about stuff and nobody really heals through it. But once the air is cleared? Once we've named it? Then... we are ready for reality – which, in the end, means we are ready for God – the ultimate reality; the ultimate truth. My way. Trying to do it on my own. Being the master of own domain. Making my thing the main thing and not God's thing the main thing will ultimately crash and burn. But when I reach the place of neutrality to say and mean, *"God, I'm ready for the real thing,"* then God can truly engage us in a place where we're teachable.

This is part of the hope that our Broadway friend who submitted this song for the series claimed. He said, *"The song's fast pace exemplifies life's fast pace and complexity. Finding ways to deal with everything hitting us from all directions... with really no end in sight... reaffirms we must have faith."* Then he said, *"You have to have a firm foundation in God... in relationship with God... to survive the journey."*

When you start running through your laundry list of woes... don't stay in the naming. Remember them. Learn from them. And move forward stronger for it. And... let your faith shine. Let it be the thing that people see in you... not negativity or pessimism. Let

them see faith. We doubt. We struggle, sure. But we don't stay there. *"Everybody's hands go up!!! ... and they stay there, and they stay there, and they stay there."* Donald Miller said this week,

*"Nothing will cost you more in life than a predetermined belief that things aren't going to work out."*

It's not the same old story, friends. The resurrection shifted this focus. All things don't wind down to death. They end in new beginnings. In new discoveries. In new hopes. What may seem like a setback may just be the non-linear way of faith that gets you in that cleared-air space that prepares you for God – for the new reality – the new path forward.

Brian Zahnd said something this week – all these things just started coming into alignment this week for whatever reason. He said, *"Despite what we may assume, spiritual growth is not the result of endless addition. Spiritual growth also requires subtraction. Spiritual progress is not knowing, knowing, knowing; spiritual progress is more often knowing, unknowing, new knowing."*

We thought we knew. We thought we had it harder in the previous generation. We thought we knew... we thought we knew... and then, *"Boom!" Here comes the unknowing so we can open our minds to new understanding."*

A dear Broadway friend shared a sermon with me this week just so excited about a new scholarly discovery about a passage and narrative in John's Gospel about Mary Magdalene. I'll link it in the sermon notes if you want to get on our Worship page on our website and find this sermon of Diana Butler Bass.<sup>2</sup> We hosted her at our church in Tulsa a few years back, but she hadn't uncovered this newness yet. Don't tell her nothing changes. I can't re-preach her word, of course, but the discovery includes the scholarship that it was more aptly Mary Magdalene, not Martha, who answers Jesus' question of, *"Do you believe me?"* in John 11, by answering, *"Yes. Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one coming into the world."*

And every nuance suggests that Mary makes this profession... the same Mary who later has the first encounter with Jesus after his resurrection... the same Mary who seems to be from Bethany and not from Magdala as was once believed as there was no such village in the first century. Instead, she is called Mary Magdalene as a title ... not as the place where she's from. Magdala in Aramaic means tower. As Jesus calls Peter *"Rock"* after his profession of faith, Mary professes faith and is named Magdala –

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<sup>2</sup> <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/mary-the-tower>. Bass preached this sermon at this year's Wild Goose Festival which you can learn more about at [www.wildgoosefestival.org](http://www.wildgoosefestival.org).

“Tower.” Mary the Tower of faith! Isn’t that something? And I can’t unpack it all here and its new scholarship so it’s still being uncovered. But it’s new! It’s new hope! And my friend is looking at history with new hope for the future it is still opening ahead of us.

It’s why three different friends more newly engaged at Broadway said to me or our pastoral staff this week, *“I’m ready to get engaged at a deeper level. Use me where I can contribute.”* *“Put me in coach!”*

This is not *“There’s nothing new under the sun”* talk. This is *“Be alert. Be present. I’m about to do something new says the Lord.”* These are questers who are not ranting about the past but projecting purpose into the future.

Could we be that church, friends? We follow a Jesus who flipped the script left and right. What script would he flip today? We know he’d be flippin’ some scripts. *“The last shall be first,”* Jesus said.

Did you know that Billy Joel never sells tickets to the front rows of his concerts? Aside from wanting to beat the scalpers, he, and I quote, *“got tired of all the bored, rich people staring up at him.”* So now, he sends his road crew out to the nosebleed sections of each concert arena to bring down the fans from the worst seats so there’ll be, as Billy says, *‘people in the front row that are really happy to be there, real fans.’*

We get to be part of the shifting narrative, friends! And that’s exciting! *“How lucky are we to be alive at this time,”* someone said to me. It was a little shocking as such is not the sentiment of most it seems. But the excitement is in the new script being written. I believe this, too! History will tell our story as a time when the Church went through a major shift. It’s one that calls for courage and understanding for each other as we grieve through some change and shifts in order to pave the way for the future the Spirit is ushering in. But it’s worth ushering in!

We take the struggle of the change for granted when the struggles were experienced by past generations. We just accept Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door at Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, as a simple part of history that birthed the Protestant church. No biggie. But... that theses contained 95 revolutionary opinions that launched the Protestant movement. Without it, we might all be Catholics today. That’s not a knock on Catholicism whatsoever. It’s just a word to ask, *“Can you imagine the grief and struggle with the radical changes of that time?”* Martin’s small group surely said, *“Dude – are you really going to nail that thing to the door?”* *“Could you at least wait until after the potluck and carwash fundraiser so that event’s not so awkward?”* And some with a little more intensity – *“Don’t do it, Martin! We’re comfortable. We just want to feel good. Don’t mess this up for all of us!”*

He couldn't have known that we'd be sitting in a house of worship today – easily labeled without any thought – a Protestant church – meaning – a protesting church. What will be said of us? Will we be named in a long list of history that some will say, “*Same ole, same ole*” or will we be part of the transformation our world desperately needs?

Once you turn through every page of Ecclesiastes, you wonder if the Quester ever comes around, ever pulls it together, ever finds the hope in the chaos. He's very much an Iggy Azalea, “*First things first I'm a realist*,” kind of Quester. And just when I'm about ready to give up on the wisdom writer having anything redemptive to share after pages of ranting, I read the final two lines of the whole book: “*The last and final word is this: Fear God. Do what God tells you. And that's it.*”

To fear God simply means to revere God... to be in awe... and when you revere something, you're not distracted, you're not swept up in the chaos, you're not hopeless or helpless... you're so in tune that your reverence brings a focused path forward.

Perhaps the question in this season of history when we're grappling with each other and grasping for familiarity and grieving all that has been lost or is changing is this: “*Do we revere God?*” Maybe we didn't start the fires we're living through today... maybe we did. But when we live in that zone of reverence for God, we'll find clarity forward together. I am confident of this. And when we do, we'll not just be in some historical list someday of this and that. We'll be part of the moment in history when the movement took off and became the next manifestation of Church that revolutionized the access to faith for generations of Questers we thought had given up on faith. Could we be part of the revolution, church?

**BROAD HEARTS   BROAD MINDS   BROAD REACH**