



# The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2024

*"Getting there..."*

## Listening for Sacred Wisdom Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- a time to be born and a time to die;
- a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- a time to kill and a time to heal;
- a time to break down and a time to build up;
- a time to weep and a time to laugh;
- a time to mourn and a time to dance;
- a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;
- a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
- a time to seek and a time to lose;
- a time to keep and a time to throw away;
- a time to tear and a time to sew;
- a time to keep silent and a time to speak;
- a time to love and a time to hate;
- a time for war and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that GOD has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what GOD has done from the beginning to the end.

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is GOD's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

*"How are you today?" "I'm getting there, thanks..."* Lots of us say it, don't we?

*"Hey Rod, how's the church going?" "Yeah... I think we're getting there."  
"Oh good. Have you worked where 'there' is yet?" "Well, sort of... but it keeps moving!!"*

It might just be me, but it feels like there's a whole lot of 'getting there' going on at the moment. It might be because it's winter, or maybe just that I'm in a reflective mood at the moment, but 'getting there' has been a lot on my mind lately. And as I talk to other people, it seems there's a few of us feeling the same way.

Whether it's the conversations around the future of our church nationally, and wondering what's going to come out of the Assembly meeting on that score, particularly around the 'ACT2' program,

Or...

The challenges for our Church Council about our future, and – right now – the issues of our building maintenance and repairs: What needs doing, what needs doing first, how we're going to pay for it etc... Sometimes it feels like we're on a bit of a treadmill, to be honest.

Or

The challenges for our people, when 'getting there' involves leaving our nice warm home to get to appointments – or church.

When I was hearing that it wasn't just me thinking about all of this, I found that it was more inspiring and interesting to me than today's lectionary readings; particularly the Gospel reading about King Herod murdering John the Baptist. (That's an important story in its own right, but I felt that Leunig and Ecclesiastes might have more to say to us today)

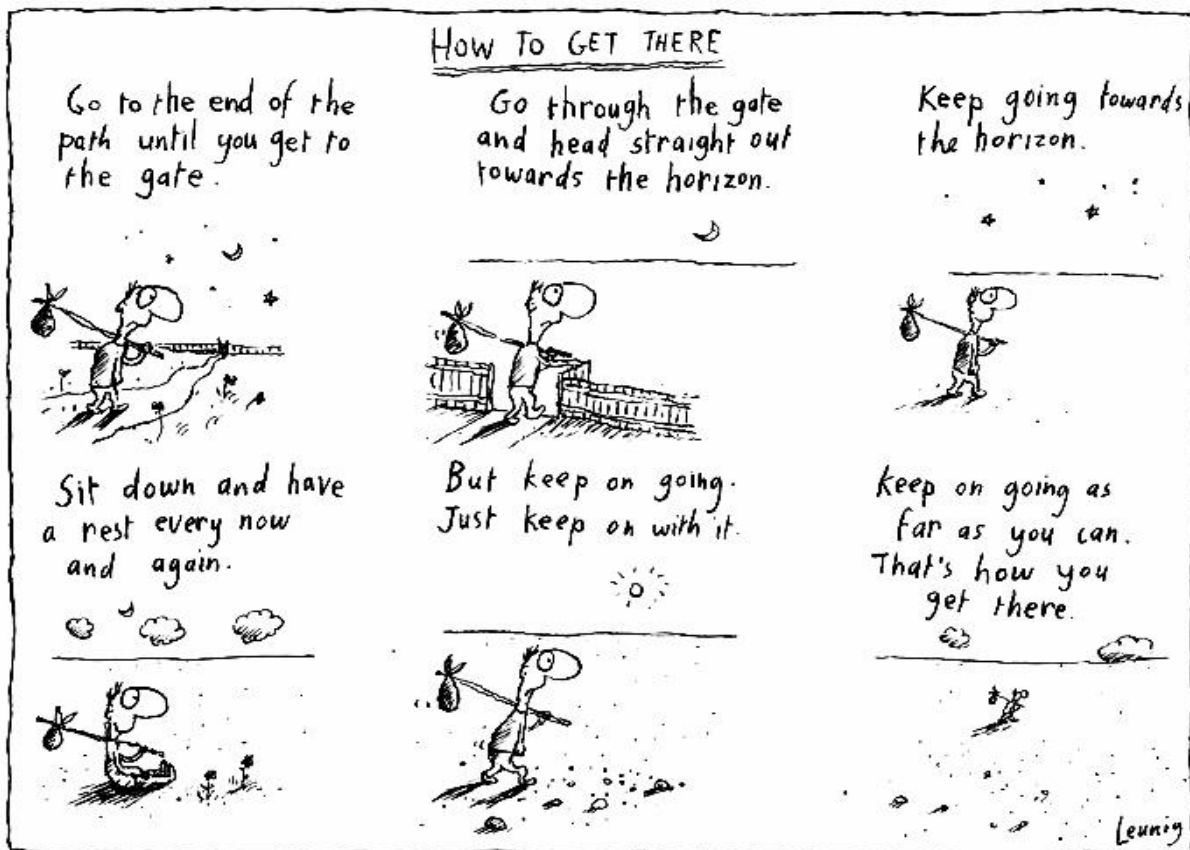
It seems to me that Ecclesiastes 3 is a devotional poem all about 'getting there'. Some people dismiss Ecclesiastes as the muttering of an old man who's lost his faith. I completely disagree! For me, this book speaks of the realities of life, including its perplexities and mysteries, and finds value in its frailty and vulnerability. And, what's more, finds sacredness there as well.

This anonymous poet recognises timeliness in the midst of life's uncertainty, and asserts the vital importance of purpose:

*I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is GOD's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.*

"When all around is mysterious and fragile", he seems to say, "and so much seems beyond control, live the life we can live, rather than the life we can't". And find GOD there.

And then there's Leunig "How to get there"



This cartoon has been precious to me for many years, since a friend and colleague shared it with a group of us at a particularly difficult time. (I had the opportunity several years ago to thank Michael Leunig for it, and tell him the story of that time. He was visibly touched to hear it).

"Start." He says. "Keep going". "Sit down for a rest sometimes". "But keep going".

I actually really like 'getting there' as an expression, because it's honest and open, and invites us to think about where "there" is, or what it might look like.

At the same time, as I said earlier, its very openness invites us into the awareness, that when we get "there", we may find that "there" has moved and is now somewhere else!

And I think this says to us that the important word is not "there", but "getting". In fact without "getting", there IS no "there". There's only "here"

Hey! Here is good! Here is fine! It's where we are right now, and it's good to attend to that, to be present to here.

Here, we're held in the embrace of GOD's Spirit, just as we've always been.  
Remember the people in the wilderness with Moses?  
Remember the people in exile in Babylon?

Their major task in each case was to remind themselves that they were still breathing the breath of GOD  
They had to learn to do that: to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, the strange land called "*here*".

It's important to be '*here*'; to be present to each season, and its timeliness.  
There's such a thing as 'Destination Anxiety'. It's the sense that you can only be happy or fulfilled when you get somewhere else (aka "there"). It might be an achievement, or a job, or wealth, or any number of things that form our "*there*".

(In our case, it might be that there's no more leaks in the church roof, or sinking floors, or cracks in the walls, or that our budget is rosy, or the building is full on Sundays, or whatever! All worthwhile, but not ends in themselves for our life as a church)

### **But if '*here*' is fine, why the need to get '*there*'?**

Because we're going to get '*there*', whether we want to or not! '*There*' is always ahead of us.

It's not that we should change, or have to change; it's that we have changed, are changing, and will change.

That's why I think that 'getting' is the important word.

It's what invites us into conversations of meaning and purpose.

It's what invites us to dream and imagine what '*there*' could be like!

It's what invites us to shape the thinking and practices for how we get there.

**It's where we have the choice to be creative and faithful as followers of Jesus' way.**

To come back to the language and imagery of Ecclesiastes 3, how might we name/describe the season we're in now, as a church? (our '*here*')

Are we able imagine future seasons? Not easy, I know. But if we have some sense of what 'there' could be like, or what we'd like the next season of this church to be like, that can help us shape the 'getting there'.

That's not destination anxiety, it's sacred imagination and practice. It's faith!

It's faith that the breath of GOD continues to be breathed into us, and that the Holy Spirit can be trusted with the future. And that's enough.

I'm not completely sure where I am in Michael Leunig's cartoon at this moment. I don't think I'm resting, specifically, but as I said before I feel myself in a reflective mood at present: thinking about the way in which I want or need to keep on going.

Maybe that's you too. If so, I dare to hope that my thoughts and words are helpful to you as well - In the name of the HOLY presence in whom we live, and move, and have our being. AMEN

Blessings, *Rod Peppiatt*