

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 31, 2016
Pentecost 11
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:23
Psalm 49:1-11
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 12:13-21

We find ourselves today deeply immersed into what Nat King Cole called the “lazy, crazy, hazy days of summer.” It is July 31, and for those churches that follow the Christian calendar, we are nearly two and a half months removed from Pentecost. We are making our way through the long season of Kingdombtide, the season where we explore what it means that the Holy Spirit has come to give birth to the Church.

For those not following the Christian calendar, the long days of summer can have a similar effect on those of us who do, in that we find at this time of year that we may be in need of a spiritual shot of adrenaline.

Well, today we get it. Roll up your sleeves and get out the cotton swabs and the alcohol, for the injection is here. Enter “the Preacher” (no, not me!). This preacher’s name is *Qoheleth* -- the Hebrew name for “one who speaks to an assembly.” The English translation of *Qoheleth* is the word “Ecclesiastes.”

In the three year lectionary cycle, Ecclesiastes appears just once (today). In churches that do not use the lectionary, chances are also good that you don’t hear

much from the pulpit from this book, with the possible exceptions of sound bytes like “eat, drink, and be merry,” or “to everything there is a season.”

One scholar has said that the book of Ecclesiastes made it into the canon of Scripture “against all odds.” Another calls the book “the great bungee jump” of Scripture.

My question: Are you ready to take the plunge? If so, let’s hear what the preacher of Ecclesiastes has to say.

In our text for today, the preacher uses the Hebrew word *havel* no less than nine times. The word carries the image of “chasing after the wind” and is translated as “vanity.”

Vanity of Vanities, says this preacher. Everything is meaningless. Life has no rhyme or reason.

You can work your fingers to the bone and all you will get is bony fingers. You can work hard all your life to leave a legacy, but when you die you will be forgotten and there is no guarantee that those you leave behind will honor your wishes. Time marches on as it always has. Generations come and go, but nothing changes.

In fact, says the preacher, if life is a game of cards, God has dealt us all a lousy hand. What is wrong cannot be made right. And what is missing cannot be

recovered. In the end, if you want to understand the meaning of life, you might as well try to chase after the wind.

Aren't you glad you came to church this morning?

I am. I am glad because in the 16 plus years that I've been your pastor, there have been days where I've wanted to stand here and say to you what this preacher has just said. The only difference is that he actually had the courage to do it.

Every one of us here today -- if we were honest -- would say that we have had times in our lives when we completely identify with the Preacher's words here. We know, and have experienced, the profound emptiness of life. We know what it's like to pursue something which we believe will make life complete or make us happy, only to feel the emptiness inside once we've attained it.

The reality is that the more we understand about life, the more painful it can be. The more we know about justice, the more injustice we see around us. The more we observe, the more evil becomes evident.

I'm glad this morning because the Preacher of Ecclesiastes speaks with a candor and honesty that is often lacking in the Church today. He acknowledges the fact that sometimes *there are painful discrepancies between our faith and the brutal facts of life*. Sometimes, there is a disconnect between our faith and our lived experience.

And if we in the Church aren't allowed to give these "disconnects" a voice, to wrestle with them in community with our brothers and sisters, then our religious faith can become yet one more vanity in a world where vanities are everywhere.

Old Testament scholar John Hayes says it like this:

There are those in [any] congregation who at least now and then...experience the profound futility [of life]. Those voices deserve to be expressed and understood, even -- and especially -- in the context of Christian worship. [PCY, Year C. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, p. 338]

I am glad, then, that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes asks the deep and hard questions, and does not hesitate to place lived experience alongside faith.

There are two primary areas where the Preacher does this, and I want to explore them briefly this morning.

The first area that has the Preacher "chasing after the wind" in his effort to make sense of life is when he tries to make sense of life or justify his existence based on reason alone.

When he does this, he realizes (like we all do), that the problem with trying to explain life by reason alone is that our wisdom -- whether it be religious, scientific, political, or economic -- is far, far exceeded by our ignorance. No wonder he concludes then that the increase of his knowledge only leads to the increase of sorrow.

A second area where the Preacher struggles is when he tries to account for the meaning of life apart from the reality of death. It's good to pursue wisdom, but in the end both the wise and the foolish person share the same fate. It's good to work hard in order to leave a legacy, but death comes and the reality is that you'll be forgotten and those left behind may not be worthy of what you leave them, and they may not steward it appropriately into the lives of others.

So, in the context of our text today, the Preacher seems to be clear about two things: if you try to explain your life and existence in terms of reason alone, and if you try to understand the meaning of your life in terms of this life only, only one conclusion awaits you: **life is utterly meaningless**. You might as well try to chase the wind.

Now is there a word of hope, a word of Good News, from this text? I believe there is.

For starters, let's remember that our text today is only the beginning of the conversation. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes wrestles with many difficult issues, and lays his soul bare in dealing with them. But near the end of this conversation, things have changed somewhat. The difficult issues have not gone away, but the Preacher has arrived at a place where he says this: **“God's ways are as hard to discern as the pathways of the wind, and as mysterious as a tiny baby being formed in the mother's womb”** (11:5).

And then, he is able to say: “Here is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is the duty of every person” (12:13).

There is a subtle shift here in the Preacher’s thinking that should not be lost on us. The beginning of the conversation speaks of life as being *meaningless*. The conversation ends with life being a *mystery*. And there is a vast difference between the two.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes doesn’t answer all of the questions he raises. But he gets to a place where he is willing to allow those questions room to breathe within the context of a relationship with a God who is greater than he is, and whose understanding is greater than his.

All of which makes me think of another preacher who was once asked to give a definition of preaching. His response: *Preaching is an attempt to place a frame around the mystery.*

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, I invite you to come with faith. Come not as those whose questions are all resolved, and whose issues are all settled. But come as those who are willing to step out in faith in the fact that life is a *mystery*, not meaningless vanity. At the heart of that mystery is the person of Jesus Christ. In him all of life’s enigmas eventually find their resolution.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.