

Everything is Vanity?
Sermon #190 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 23, 2023
Ecclesiastes 1

Two women were traveling on a private plane when it crashed on a deserted island in the South Pacific. After the crash, one of the women began searching the island for signs of civilization. She found nothing and rushed over to her friend screaming, “We’re trapped! This place is uninhabited! There’s no food or water; we’re going to die!”

The other woman leaned back against the fuselage of the wrecked plane and calmly responded, “Don’t worry. We’re going to be fine. I make \$10 million a year.”

The first woman grabbed her friend by the shoulders and said, “Snap out of it! Didn’t you hear me? We’re stranded on a deserted island. There’s no water, no food. We are going to die!”

Un-phased, her friend said, “Don’t worry. We are going to be fine. I make \$10 million dollars a year.”

The first woman didn’t know what to do. She yelled back, “You must have hit your head in the crash. I am telling you, we are doomed! There is nothing on this island, no food, nor water. It doesn’t matter how much money you make; we are going to die!”

Her friend looked her straight in the eyes and said, “Don’t make me say this again. We have nothing to worry about. I make \$10 million dollars a year, and I give 10% to my church. Don’t you understand? My pastor will find us!”¹

We laugh because as ridiculous as it is, we suspect there might be a kernel of truth somewhere in this story. At the same time, we can hear the ancient words of an ancient philosopher in the outcry of the more sensible woman.

¹ Ben Boswell. *From Anxiety to Trust*, Sermon for Myers Park Baptist Church, 5.14.2023.

The King James Version calls it vanity:

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher,
vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

But the NIV sounds more like our stranded woman crying:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!
Everything is meaningless!”

It doesn't matter how much money you make,
What do humans gain from all their labor
and toiling under the sun? (v.2-3).

Still, it sounds like the wealthy woman has heard some extraordinarily good stewardship sermons in her day and has responded in such a way that instilled within her confidence that even though others may give up the search, her pastor, like a good shepherd, will search until she is found.

And I don't want to beat around the bush, this is a stewardship sermon, and as is often the case, the wisdom found in today's reading speaks to much, much more than just our financial investments. It cuts straight through all of that and gets at the biggest existential, philosophical, and spiritual question of all: What is the meaning of my life?

This question is important on the good days and the normal days but on days like today, when the layers of grief compound, we often find ourselves asking the same question with a heavier tone. One well-versed in the woes of human mortality and yet one that stubbornly clings to a hope that life cannot purely be meaningless. Surely there is some value, some worth, some purpose to our existence.

In our faith tradition, sometimes even asking this question is perceived as a lack of faith. Jesus, they say, is the meaning of life. Well, that sounds good, but when we pursue that a little, it becomes hard to explain at best and completely superficial at worst. When we look at the broader Christian tradition, though, and pay attention to some of the undercurrents of Christian history, we quickly discover that doubt - even of this magnitude - is an ever-present companion to faith. Doubt and faith go hand in hand. And perhaps there is no better example in the biblical narrative than the book of Ecclesiastes.

It is not a commonly quoted book, except for the third chapter which people love to repeat: For everything, there is a season... you remember that part right?

But the bigger frame into which those words were penned is an epic tale on the scale of Gilgamesh. In fact, even though the two literary works (The Epic of Gilgamesh and the book of Ecclesiastes) are separated by more than 2000 years of time, their stories are remarkably similar.

The main character, a kingly ruler of sorts with almost super-human qualities, goes on a quest to exhaust all wisdom and knowledge, only to find that such pursuits are meaningless, pointless, fruitless because human beings cannot know it all. Gilgamesh would say that the fullness of knowledge remains in the realm of the ancient gods. Ecclesiastes would say that wisdom resides with Yahweh, the one, eternal God. Both would agree that for human beings, there are some things that will have to remain a mystery.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “the book of Ecclesiastes has been [called] the strangest book of the Bible.”² Which might explain why there are so few references to the book in the Revised Common Lectionary: the schedule of readings followed by most mainline Christian churches for preaching and teaching. Even still, I believe - and some other biblical scholars agree - the author’s struggle (which is told as the narrative unfolds) is mythic... timeless in a sense that it resonates with every generation, ancient and contemporary alike.³

We are not completely sure who wrote the book. Tradition credits King Solomon, and that’s why it appears in our Bibles with other wisdom literature like Proverbs and Song of Solomon. But a close reading of the text itself raises some questions about Solomon’s authorship. What is clear though, and perhaps more important is that the author is deeply engaged in the world, what is happening around him, and what it means for the journey of faith. You see, the person behind the ancient pen is struggling. His beliefs are in line with the traditional theologies of his time.

² Scott, 191

³ William P. Brown in *Interpretation: Ecclesiastes*, p. 11

He believes in one God, who is the creator of the world. He believes this God has the power to correct all the injustices of the world. And he also believes that humanity is weak - from dust you were born, to dust you will return. He understands the traditional theological assumptions of his time which insist that divine blessings flow among the righteous and that struggle is inflicted upon the wicked. That's the ancient way of saying: good things happen to good people and you know, the implicit opposite, bad things happen to bad people.

But this ancient author is struggling with what he believes and what he sees. His theology is at odds with his experience. In other words, "He is in the midst of a crisis of meaning; things in his world do not measure up to his traditional beliefs."⁴

[Now this is starting to sound like Kate Bowler's thesis in her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved.*]

And it is precisely in the middle of this crisis of meaning that the epic journey begins... the journey in pursuit of wisdom, of meaning, of purpose beyond all apparent vanities.

Now I need to wrap this up so I will spoil the ending for you.

After a chapters-long tale, again one that reminds us of the ancient Akkadian, Epic of Gilgamesh, the author discovers that even "in the face of unyielding madness and folly," joy is still possible. It is a gift from God, to be sure, and is often found NOT in the large and impressive things like wealth, power, fame, or good fortune, but rather in the smaller, more ordinary things. Things like sharing a pew with someone who knows your pain. Like sharing a meal with one who knows you better than you know yourself (the good stuff and the not so good stuff). Like singing a hymn and remembering all the times you've sung it before: funerals, church services, maybe even while you're doing dishes and just letting the words flow forth from your lips.

⁴ Milton P Horne. *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Proverbs - Ecclesiastes*. p. 375.

Yes, even though the answers are not always so apparent; and the path toward wisdom is neither linear nor clear, the ancient author finds that it is better to be wise than a fool (7:11-12),

it is better to live in the moment than in the past (7:10),
it is best make the most of the time we have (9:10),
and that one should seek God while time allows (12:1-2).

Furthermore, the meaning of life is most often found in the pursuit and the presence of God. Everything else is... as the author began... meaningless. I must admit that there are days when I too question: What is the purpose of all of this? But without fail, as soon as the question begins to overpower - I'll come to church, because it is my rhythm, my top priority, my most holy commitment - and when I make it here, YOU show me that this really does matter. Not because being here answers all the questions. Not because the work we do in this world can right every injustice. Not because we have it all figured out. But because we are merely human, all sharing a common pursuit toward wisdom, toward justice, toward peace, toward knowledge... and into the mystery of God that is far too much for any of us to ever comprehend - except in part.

And so we keep showing up, with and for one another. Offering everything we have - time, talents, and resources - because somewhere deep down we know that this is the only thing that matters. Everything else is meaningless.

Mary Oliver ends one of her magnificent poems with a profound question which honestly reminds us of both the book of Job and Ecclesiastes. In modern words, her poem issues both a call and a challenge to us on this Stewardship Sunday in which we ponder the meaning of life among other things that linger in the corners of our hearts.

Hear now her words from Poem 133: The Summer Day:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean —
The one who has flung herself out of the grass,

The one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
Who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —
Who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
Into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
Which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

As often as I can,

as much as I can,

and as best as I can,

I plan to invest it here, in God's church,
working to bring the Kingdom of Heaven here

- on earth as it is in heaven.

So what about you?

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Where will you invest your time, your talents, your energy, and your resources? And when your choice is made, will you find that your greatest investments yield great meaning or idle vanity?