

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 Bill Uetricht Pentecost 8 7.29.25

Would you like to feel a little depressed today? Would you like to go down the road that leads you to despair? Most of you probably aren't interested in going there. Most of us don't come to worship with the desire to be depressed or filled with despair. Most of us come here for the opposite reason. We want to be encouraged, buoyed up. Life's rough. Who wants the church to make it rougher on us?

But I have to be frank with you. The Bible is very capable of taking us down the hard path, very willing to touch the tough things that happy, peppy religion often avoids like the plague. From the prosperity gospel preachers and the smiling, plastic-surgery-enhanced televangelists, you probably will never hear a sermon based on the book of Ecclesiastes, unless they talk about the seasons of chapter three. You know, "there is a time and season for every matter under heaven." These happy preachers like the season motif, even if they don't recognize that the author of Ecclesiastes is probably lamenting the seasons, not singing their praises. He is probably saying, "You know, this is just the way life is: there is a time to be born and there's a time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh." Life has these seasons. It's just the way it is. Ho hum!

The Bible is not going to let us off easy. It isn't just going to give us the happy stuff. It's too real for that. Listen to the teacher's words:

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Life is a puff of smoke.

Life is a vapor, a mist. It has little substance. It disappears quickly. It's meaningless. It's empty.

It is a matter of futility.

Just what you wanted to hear, I am sure. Sorry! The Bible is just so honest. Oh, but you say. I've got a good brain. I am wise. I can figure out things.

I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom

all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given humans to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun, and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

Yikes! You know more, you have greater wisdom, and you multiply your sadness. Now there is a cheery thought! But it might explain why some of the most intelligent and wisest among us are some of the saddest people we are acquainted with. You know more, and you, therefore, know more of what there is to be sad about. Sometimes it is just easier not to grow in intelligence or wisdom. Sometimes it is just easier to have your head buried in the sand. Even wisdom is vanity.

But, but, but, it's not all vanity. Look at how hard I work. There's meaning in my work and what my work gives me.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to my successor, and who knows whether he will be wise or foolish? Yet he will be master of all for which I have toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toils of my labor under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. . . What do humans get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? Nothing!! All is vanity.

Death puts our hard work into perspective. And here I thought that since I worked harder than anyone else—and I have—that I earned more points. I was so proud of all my storage spaces that I got because of all my hard work. I have so many of them. They are scattered all over town.

You think you have a big barn? I have a bigger one. And I still need a larger one.

Yes, I have worked hard for my money, and life better treat me right. But it doesn't. I am fool, a dolt. This very night my life is being demanded of me. All that stuff I've collected, where will it take me? And who really wants it after all? I probably could pass on the bike. But let's be honest. My son probably isn't going to take it to the bike shop like I do every year to get it tuned. I can see him leaving it outside where it will get rusted because of all the rain.

Vanity of vanity! It's all vanity. "For all the days of human beings are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." It's true. Sometimes I don't sleep very well as I am thinking about things over which I have no control, things that are like vapor and mist; they come and go. Oh, it's all vanity! Walter Bouzard is right: "Our strained efforts are unable to effect a change in the way the world goes. Human busy-ness is generally irksome."

Now isn't it interesting that Ecclesiastes has King Solomon reach this conclusion? Now truthfully, there aren't many modern scholars who believe that Solomon actually wrote Ecclesiastes. But the tradition gives him the pen in order to say something profound. If the man who had achieved the highest position in his country, had become the richest in his land, had married the greatest number of wives, came to the conclusion that life is vanity, then perhaps you and I should pay attention to the ways that we turn a whole lot of stuff that isn't that important, a whole lot of stuff that is vapor, into something that is entirely too important.

Now you might say to me that you find it a bit disingenuous that a rich guy reaches this conclusion. When you have seven houses, 14 cars, 35 big-screen televisions, and more power than you can ever imagine, it's easy to conclude, "This doesn't mean anything." When you are struggling

to put food on your table, when there is more month than money, you may not have the luxury to become philosophical, to lose yourself in existential despair.

It is very intriguing to me that atheism tends to be more common among the well-off. I see it among our children these days. Those from wealthier schools tend to label themselves “atheist” more often than those from poorer schools. It has been my experience when I traveled in poorer regions of the world that atheism isn’t overly popular. There is definitely something about economic wealth that changes one’s perspective and perhaps gives you freedom to be in your head more often. Yet, I will not use that observation as a way to avoid the teacher today. You and I need to take him seriously. It’s all vanity.

Now, in many ways, that does seem very depressing. Where is the good news in all of this? After all, Bill, aren’t you supposed to be a proclaimer of good news?

Well, first, the preacher is just being honest. We are served by honesty. It’s helpful to know that what we experience sometimes is shared by others. At times, life seems useless. I think about that when I am shaving in the morning. Every morning, I go through the same routine. Same old, same old. Paul Tillich says that the teacher’s claim that “all is useless has Biblical authority that is deserved.” According to Tillich, “It is not an authority produced by a mistake . . . It is the authority of truth. [The teacher’s] description of the human situation is truer than any poetry glorifying humanity and our destiny. His honesty opens our eyes for those things which are overlooked or covered up by optimists of all kinds.”

We are served by the truth. The truth of “you are going to die tonight” is a two-by-four that slaps you upside the face and wakes you (and me) up. Life really is about making money, collecting stuff, and

building bigger barns? You're a fool. It's not that you are a bad person; you are just a foolish person.

You cannot secure life. Your work can't. Your stuff can't. Your stock portfolio can't. Your power can't. Your popularity can't. Your religion can't. Your good diet and exercise can't. Your proper behavior can't. All of those things are useless, are vapor, when it comes to securing life. Death will have its way with all of us. So why get all geeked up about vapor?

Life is never something we can secure, earn, or achieve. Life at its depths is gift. We don't make it happen. The gift is what is most important. To live life in light of the gift will make us rich toward God. The gift will set our minds on the things that are above. When life is about the gift, when life is about grace, a whole lot of stuff won't be so important, the things that we do and collect that make us anxious and tight-fisted. When life is about the gift, we won't need to rank other people, which will help us get rid of "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from our mouths." When life is about the gift, we will build community, be compassionate, love generously. When life is about the gift we can relax. Life is not dependent upon us, all our possessions, all our money, all our work.

Sometimes we need the tough stuff. Sometimes we should join the teacher in saying, "It's all vanity," because let's face it, sometimes we take ourselves and life entirely too seriously. Sometimes we are led to think that it is all up to us. Really? Vanity of vanities; it's all vanity. Say that and then get prepared to live fully.

