

What's the Point?
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:13–21
Luke 12:13–21
Sunday, July 31, 2022

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. Help us to simply hear the word that you have spoken and to follow, obediently and lovingly, in Jesus' name. Amen.

We'll get to our reading from Luke in just a minute, but first I wanted to spend some time with Ecclesiastes. If I asked what you knew about Ecclesiastes, my guess is that a few of us might be familiar with the verses, "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 mourn and a time to dance; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace." Although we might be more familiar with those verses from the song by The Byrds than we are with Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is not a book that we spend a lot of time with, so it's not a book that many of us are very familiar with. And those verses ("For everything there is a season...") don't really capture the true essence of this book.

Ecclesiastes is one of the five “Wisdom Books” of the Old Testament - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. Eugene Peterson describes these Wisdom Books as teachings on how to live “on earth as it is in heaven.” The original title of Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, which means *gatherer* or *one who gathers*, although Martin Luther translated it as *Preacher*, and that has kind of stuck. Traditionally, it was thought to have been written by King Solomon, although it does not specify that anywhere. The very first verse of the book says, “The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” So it could be Solomon. It could be one of David’s *other* sons. *Jesus* was referred to as “the son of David,” so it could be a much *later* king who just uses that title. Whatever the case, we know the person speaking in this book as *Qoheleth*, or the Preacher.

When the Bible was translated from Hebrew into Greek, Qoheleth was given the name *Ecclesiastes*, which refers to someone who speaks to an assembly; not just *the gatherer*, but someone who

speaks to a gathering. And when you actually *read* the book from beginning to end, you can't help but wonder, "Who gave *this guy* the microphone? Why is *this* in the Bible?" Because the Preacher here comes across like the drunk uncle at a wedding reception who grabs the microphone and launches into a tirade of, "What's the point?! What's the point of *any* of this?! We're all going to die! This is all *meaningless!* We're just wasting our time like any of this *really matters!* So *drink up* because it's all *pointless!*"

Lest you think I am exaggerating, here is how the book starts off. "Vanity of vanity! All is vanity! What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever...All things are wearisome; more than one can express...What *has been* is what *will be*, and what *has been* done is what *will be* done; there is nothing new under the sun...The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them...it is an unhappy business

that God has given to human beings 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. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” And that’s just chapter one.

Where the Preacher ends up is to say, “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil...[but] this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.” That really makes you want to rush home and read the rest of this book, doesn’t it?

That word *vanity* that he keeps using - he uses it more than three dozen times, more than all the other books of the Old Testament combined, so it’s a major theme here. We are used to understanding that word *vanity* as meaning *conceited*. Someone who is *vain* is someone who takes excessive pride in their appearance or accomplishments. But that’s not quite how it’s used here. This word *vanity* is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which more literally means *vapor*. And what is vapor? Vapor is *temporary*. *Fleeting*. It is *not lasting*. Here one moment, gone

the next. You can *see* it, *touch* it, but there is no real *substance* to it.

The Preacher is saying here that everything is transient and impermanent; nothing that one does will last.¹ All our *work*, all our *possessions*, all of the things that we fill our time with and think are so important are gone in a breath with nothing to show for them. If that is the way that we view the world, then life would be without meaning. What's the point? And actually, that's what happened to the Preacher, who says, "I gave my heart up to despair," because none of this really matters.

That's a hard place to be. And it is a place that more and more people seem to be at lately. "What does it matter if we wear masks and take all these precautions if we're all just going to get Covid anyway?" "What difference does it make who we vote for? Nothing is really going to change." "Why should I try to talk to this person with whom I differ politically? They're not going to listen to

¹ J. Blake Couey, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-ecclesiastes-12-12-14-218-23-5>

me.” “Why do I keep spending so much time and energy on this job when it isn’t really making any difference?” Those are just a few of the statements that I have heard over the past couple of weeks. It’s like there is this pervasive feeling of helplessness and futility right now, and it is so easy to just give our hearts up to despair.

What’s the point? That is a question that can be asked in despair, or it can be asked in pursuit of a deeper, more meaningful life. Either way, it is a question that leads us to Jesus.

Our second reading is from Luke’s gospel, chapter 12, verses 13-21: Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But Jesus said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

It’s like Jesus is echoing Ecclesiastes here. The Preacher says that there is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. The rich man in Jesus’ parable says, “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” The Preacher says that work is vanity, vapor because one day everything that you worked so hard for is going to be left to someone else, and who knows what they are going to do with it? In Jesus’ parable, God says to this

rich man, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And these things you have worked so hard for, whose will they be?”

But Jesus is not echoing the *despair* of Ecclesiastes. He is not saying that nothing matters so why bother. Jesus is saying that the *point* of life is not work and the security and material possessions that it can bring. Those things are fleeting. They aren't *permanent*. You can't take them with you. They will be left for someone else, and who knows what they will do with them. A friend of mine's father died recently, after spending his life focusing on *work* and *material possessions*, at the expense of relationships. When he died, my friend had to go in and clean out his apartment, and almost everything that he had worked so hard for, devoted so much time and energy to was thrown away. It was all he *could* do with it, given the circumstances. A life devoted to work, money, things...vapor.

If *that* is all your life is about, what's the point?

But there is an interesting detail in Jesus' parable that helps us *see* the point. It says that the rich man thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my good. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" Who is that man *talking* to? Himself. He's not talking to anyone else. He's not *considering* anyone else. Theologian Elisabeth Johnson writes about this man, "he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest his bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others...he appears to live only for himself."²

He says these things to himself because he has no one else to say them *to*. He has devoted his life to work and money and material possessions at the expense of *relationships*. When God

² Elisabeth Johnson, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-4>

says, “These things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Well, normally they would go to his heir, his eldest son. He apparently doesn’t even *have* one. No family, no friends, just barns full of grain. A life reduced to vapor. “So it is,” Jesus says, “with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

That’s the point for Jesus. Being rich toward God. And *how* are we rich toward *God*? It’s not just giving money to God, as if God has any need for our money or our grain or our *things*. We show our love for *God* by loving our *neighbors*. We are rich toward *God* by being rich toward our *neighbors*. Not just our family and our friends but *all* the people around us. It’s about being rich toward the poor and those in need, toward strangers, toward enemies. And not just rich with our *money* but with our time and our abilities and our love. It’s about devoting our lives to that which *lasts*. And what *lasts* is *love*.

Paul said to the Christians in Corinth, “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” It’s important to have faith. But one day you won’t *need* faith, because you will see God face to face. It’s important to have hope. But one day you won’t need hope, because you will *have* that which you have hoped for. The only thing that lasts from this life to the next is love.

What does it matter how big our barns are or how much grain is in them if we don’t have anyone to share it all with?

Ecclesiastes doesn’t say that work is *bad*. It just says that it’s not what *lasts*. It doesn’t say that possessions are *bad*. They just aren’t what *lasts*. So by all means work. Just don’t do it for *yourself*. By all means eat, drink, and be merry. Just don’t do it *alone*. “It’s all about priorities. It is about who is truly God in our lives. It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts that God has given us. It is about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our

neighbor, toward God's mission to bless and redeem the world."³

That which our souls long for will never be satisfied through work or money or material possessions. Because our souls long for love. And love only comes through relationships, with God and with each other. *That* is what makes life truly worth living. *That* is the only thing we carry with us from this life to the next. *That* is the point. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ Elisabeth Johnson, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-4>