

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost • August 4, 2019ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26

“Chasing”

I've got some bad news for you.

Life can be utterly meaningless. You go to school to fill your head with knowledge and acquire tools for use in the great wide world. Kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, college or university, grad school, one after the next. Why? You work to get a good job, trade skill, profession, find a place in the world to provide for yourself, your family, and even your neighbor. Why? You train your body for sports, exercise for fun, do physical therapy after injuries or surgeries to make yourself stronger and more able to do what you want to do. Why? You eat and drink – vegan or omnivore, health food or junk food, teetotaler or libertine – for sustenance and enjoyment. Why? You read all the books, watch all the shows, catch all the movies and plays, buy all the toys to entertain yourself. Why? What's the point if you're just going to die, when it's highly unlikely that the world will remember you 100 years from now? Life can be utterly meaningless.

Solomon knew that better than most of us. Solomon, son of King David, ruler of all Israel and famed recipient of God's gift of wisdom, knew what life was like. He knew, because he lived it. He lived it to its fullest! He had wealth, power, prosperity, pleasure, fame – pretty much a dream life in the eyes of the world. Good things happened for him; bad things, too. He wasn't different from you or me or anyone else that way. But as Solomon sought to live life to its fullest, he didn't seek God. He did not walk in the way of his father David. It sounds like he tried to explore every other way to find meaning in life that came to his mind. None of them lasted. And then, finally, late in his life, Solomon realized what he'd been missing.

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecc. 1:12-14)

Solomon came to understand that life can be utterly meaningless. Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, he keeps coming back to this phrase, “a striving after wind.” Even for the king who had everything the world could offer, life was all about chasing after something he could never catch. He longed for something for which he felt a deep need, but nothing ever really met that need. From the perspective of Solomon's divinely imparted wisdom, life was worse than meaningless: it was filled with futility. And how sad is that?

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ecc. 1:2)

When you read through Ecclesiastes – depending on the translation that you use – you'll keep seeing this word “vanity” popping up. And in Hebrew, when you see a phrase such as “vanity of vanities,” know that the author is using it as a superlative: “the vanity-est vanity.” This is one of my favorite books of scripture, and I've personally found it helpful to translate the Preacher's word for “vanity” as “vapor.” It captures his point for us today. You might have felt that, at times, you've been running on fumes. From Solomon's perspective, you've been running *after* fumes. Vapor. There's something there you can never catch or hold on to because it's insubstantial and fleeting. On a humid day such as those we've been experiencing here recently, how much luck would you have if you attempted to catch that humidity in your hand? You know something's out there – you can certainly feel it! – but those vapors will continue to elude your grasp, no matter how far you're reaching or how quickly you're chasing after it.

Life can be utterly meaningless. And painful. Don't forget painful! “*What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*” (Ecc. 2:22-23) Do you need Solomon to point out the hardships of life, or do you think you could tell him a thing or two? Life in this broken world brings pain of both body and mind. Solomon uses the Hebrew word “כַּעַס” (*ka'as*) to capture the frustration that we human beings often feel. Our translation for it, vexation, is one of my favorite words in the English language. There's something about “vexation” that evokes the exasperation that so often accompanies the human experience. When did you last experience vexation? Did it come upon you as you were trying to get something done? Did it keep you up in the middle of the night? As the parent of two little kids who occasionally are “chasing after vapor” in their own ways, I feel vexed more often than I'd like! As people in

a broken world, people who are longing for meaning but end up striving after wind, what hope can we really have if life is all meaningless?

Here's the thing: **Life IS utterly meaningless... without God in the picture.** It ultimately doesn't matter what you're chasing after in life, because you are going to die. And then you won't be able to hold on to anything at all. This is Solomon's point: you should despair over anything you are or have or do, because that's all vapor. **Human beings need to be in relationship with God for life to have any meaning. God is integral to His creation; it lacks purpose and function without Him.** Without God in the picture, life is meaningless. With God, however, it's a very different picture! Even though the same things might happen in a life, good and bad and bittersweet, it is only life lived with God that has lasting meaning, because He redeems it. He created life to be lived with Him.

Jesus has come into our broken world to redeem our lives and reconnect us with God. Our brokenness pushes us to go chasing after fleeting vapor. But God, in His grace, has reached down to embrace humanity and give us true and lasting lift with Him.

In our New Testament readings today, we hear some practical advice as to what lasting life lived with God looks like. In Colossians 3, Paul calls us to seek the things that are above, not worldly vapor. In Christ, you are being "renewed in knowledge after the image of [your] creator. By way of contrast, our Lord tells the story of the rich fool in Luke 12. That man's mind was fixed on the things of life on earth. You've probably heard this before, but **he who dies with the most toys... still dies.** Life's meaning and worth are not found in possessions or wealth, but in the value that you have in sight of God who came to live, suffer death, and rise to redeem you. That is where you will find joy: in Christ.

So follow Solomon's direction and **keep life simple.** Fear God and keep His commandments. You can't control all of life, nor are you meant to! Entrust to His care everything that causes you vexation. God is God; you're not. And that's a good thing!

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (Ecc. 2:24-25)

Made righteous through God's gift of faith, living in the confidence that He alone is God and we are not, a person can enjoy God's other gifts, trusting in His grace and ultimate rescue. And in that is joy that cannot be taken away. Relying solely on your efforts, in contrast, leaves you, like that rich fool, with nothing in the end. So make use of **God's gift of contentment.** The rich fool only partially understood Solomon's advice: you should eat, drink, and enjoy... all those gifts which come from the hand of God. God has given you and me many great gifts; even if you don't have as much as King Solomon, you can still make use of and enjoy what you have. Because God gives His people wisdom so that we might experience active contentment, giving thanks for and putting to use all that comes from His hand.

Life can be utterly meaningless, a chasing after vapor, if one is not in relationship with God. Keep life simple: trust in God and enjoy the life He has given. You have lasting life in the Son, Christ Jesus, who puts all our chasing to rest.

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. – Ecclesiastes 1:14