

Written Copy: Searching for the Meaning of Life-Ecclesiastes 2:22-24

Proper 13-the 8th Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, August 4th, 2019

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:22-24

²²What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³For 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. ²⁴There 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,

Exegetical Statement

King Solomon is looking back on his life and his search for meaning in life apart from God. He uses his wisdom and knowledge given to him by God. He examines a life centered on pleasure, on accumulation of wealth, and on work and producing things with one's hands. The conclusion he comes to is apart from God all these pursuits are meaningless. A man toils and strives to build a good life for himself, but it all leaves him upon death, and who is to say that the one whom he leaves it to will mismanage it and lose it all? His toil lasts all day and even at night sleep escapes him as he worries about his wealth. Striving for happiness, fulfillment, and meaning in this way is like trying to catch the wind in your hand: an impossible and meaningless pursuit. Solomon's conclusion is to find happiness and meaning in all things are a gift from God's hand who grants wisdom, knowledge, and joy. The true meaning of life is found in man's relationship with God as His child.

Focus Statement:

The meaning of life can only come from God. Everything we have and hold is a gift from Him: our wisdom, skill, wealth, and abilities. But His greatest gift to us is Christ who by His death and resurrection declares us worthy to be God's precious children. The end goal of all that He gives us is to carry us through this life as His Church to the Eternal Life to come. While none of our earthly treasures will go with us into Eternal Life God promises better treasures to come that will last for an eternity.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

The world that has dismissed God has dismissed the true meaning of life. For them the meaning of life and their identity is wrapped up in the pursuits of work and leisure: how much have I accomplished, how much have I accumulated, how much fun can I have. You only live once so fill this life with as much as you can and thereby block the view of the end because you can't take it with you and it may not even last after you're gone. We in the Church sometimes lose focus on the true meaning of life by seeing our faith as a gift for this life only, and forget that nothing we have now will go with us after we die

What the hearer should do as a result:

Live with Jesus as the reason and focus of our lives. Seek our enjoyment, fulfillment and happiness in all things not as if they are the end goal, but as gifts and tools to enjoy now while our eyes remain fixed on the eternity to come, and to use to fix the eyes of the lost on the true meaning of life too.

Subject Sentence: Find the meaning of life in Jesus

Rumor has it there was once a young lady who came to see the Catholic Priest to give Confession. She knelt before him and said, "Forgive me father, for I have sinned." The elderly priest responded, "What have you to confess my child?" She said, "Vanity, Father! My life is full of vanity! I spend too much time each day in front of my mirror, combing my hair, and gazing at how beautiful I look." The priest paused for a moment, taking a good look at her. Then he responded, "Good news, my daughter! You are not guilty of any sin. You just need a good pair of glasses."

The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes begins what is really a sermon with the phrase (**Ecclesiastes 1:2**) "**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**" Now, nowhere in this book does the author give his proper name. But he does allude to his identity in **Ecclesiastes 1:1** "**The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem**" and in **Ecclesiastes 1:12** "**I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.**" So, he is a son of David, who reigned as king in Jerusalem over all Israel. Following David there was only one other king who reigned over all Israel and that was his son Solomon. Following Solomon, the empire split in half becoming the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. Further on he says in **Ecclesiastes 1:13** "**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.**" Solomon was known for the wisdom that God granted to him in answer to his prayer. In fact, save for one, there has been no one wiser in the history of the world. But why not give us his name? Vanity? Perhaps. But the name Solomon is a derivation of the Hebrew word "be at peace". His musings on the meaning of life left him anything but peaceful.

And what did his wisdom reveal to him? Basically that "life sucks and then you die." He calls the life that man has been given by God to live "an unhappy business". It has been such ever since the Fall. Following Adam and Eve's sin and as a direct consequence God said to Adam (**Genesis 3:17-19**) ¹⁷ "**Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;** ¹⁸ **thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.**" ¹⁹ By

the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Ever since then life is hard. Ever since then "life sucks and then you die".

As Solomon went on to say in **Ecclesiastes 1:14 "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind"** Now it's helpful to understand exactly what Solomon means by the term "Vanity". It can mean having an excessive amount of pride in oneself and one's belongings. But the word being translated here means more. It describes what life becomes when our self-love and self-indulgence becomes the center point of our lives; when those things become our reason for living. The word describes something that is unsubstantial, something filled with worthlessness, lacking any kind of fruit, hollow and devoid of any real meaning. He emphasizes this by saying it is like a "**striving after the wind**". Picture a cold winter's day, where when you exhale you can see your breath. What if I told you to exhale and then quickly close your fist around your breath to capture it inside? What would you end up with? Nothing. The visible appearance of your breath disappears quickly. And even the breath that you blow in your hand leaks out between your fingers. It's a stupid useless endeavor. That's how Solomon describes life when we seek meaning apart from God. Life sucks and then you die.

Now the world today would agree with that assessment of life during the age Solomon lived. They labored in their occupations of farmer and herdsman without the benefit of the modern machinery and technology that we have today. Today we can work much more efficiently, producing far more in a day than the single laborer or even a team of laborers could ever dream of. And through the advances in science and medicine we are kept healthier, we live longer, and can be productive into our later years beyond what many could in Solomon's day. We are so efficient that society demanded new ways and means to enjoy our leisure. We have sports and health clubs where we can exercise while watching the news or listening to a book on tape. That's efficient use of time. And when we want to sit and relax, we have umpteen million of channels on cable or satellite to watch. Questions that used to force us to go and search out the answer at a library we now can answer by speaking the question into our phones. "Hey Alexa!"

With all these resources to make use of the extra time we have from more efficient work, and electric lights that allow us to extend our waking hours, the world should be a much happier, healthier, and less stressful place; right? Wrong! We have the same problem that Solomon saw in his day because people today fall into the trap of seeking the meaning to life apart from God.

The unbelieving world has written off the existence of God, or at least an active personal God. Instead He is a figment of human imagination, or at best an impersonal force life lacks any inherent meaning. We weren't created but instead all evolved from some cosmic accident. And unless you believe in some kind of reincarnation where you come back as who knows what, the end of your life on earth is just that. THE END. Period. Considering your own death means looking into the abyss and finding nothing there. No bottom. So one must make this life count while you live it. One must do whatever is necessary to take the mind off this unhappy ending. So the world seeks to fill the void with an almost infinite number of possibilities: drugs and alcohol, sex and pornography, striving after wealth, power, and success. Life becomes about establishing one's own heaven here on earth since there won't be anything afterwards. But none of these things bring any happiness. Just as Solomon observed in his day so too in our day: (**Ecclesiastes 2:22-23**) " ²²**What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³For 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.**" Instead of being healthier and more rested, people are more stressed, to the point of that stress spilling over into the anger and violence that we see nightly on the news.

And while we in the Church may not share that view into the abyss that the unbelieving world has, we are drawn into the way they seek meaning from anything and everything apart from God. We too begin focusing on building our own personal kingdom. We toil and strive to make this life as close to heaven on earth as we can. Spurred on by what we hear and see in movies, TV, books, as well as the lives of our neighbors and friends, we unconsciously buy into making our lives about what we can have and hold and produce.

Now unlike the world, know that when you die you can't take it with you. But nonetheless we continue striving so as to leave a legacy for our children, if not a name and reputation for ourselves after we are gone. But that may not always work out as we plan. Case in point Bernard Stroh. He was the founder of the company that manufactured Stroh's Beer and Stroh's Ice Cream right here in Detroit. He came to America as an immigrant from Germany in 1850 with only \$150 in his pocket and his family's recipe for brewing beer. Through his toil and hard work the business he started, by the 1980's, had become the 3rd largest brewing company in the world. The family's fortune was estimated at @ \$700 million. Today, 5 generations later, the company is gone; a victim of an overload of debt, stiff competition, and bad management by his children and grandchildren. The name survives today only as a brand of beer owned and produced by Pabst Brewing Company based in Los Angeles. The ice cream brand exists as a regional brand owned and manufactured by Dean Foods in Dallas Texas. Solomon was ahead of his time when he wrote: **Ecclesiastes 2:18-20** “¹⁸**I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,** ¹⁹**and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.** ²⁰**So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,**” Life sucks and then you die.

And the reason why life is that way for the world, and can become so for you and I, is illustrated in out Gospel Lesson. Jesus tells a story that could just as easily have taken place today as when He walked the earth. He tells of a man whose farm produced an exceptionally bountiful harvest. So much so that his storehouses could not hold all of it. The solution the man came up with? (**Luke 12:18-20**) “¹⁸**And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.** ¹⁹**And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'** ²⁰**But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'** What about the night God requires your soul of you? What are you imagining might be left after you? How about several generations after you? What kind of the kingdom are you are building here on earth? What will be left on the Last Day when your body is raised from the dead?

None of it! Not a thing. And that is the moral of the story, and of Solomon's fretful assessment of life here on earth in a broken, sinful, fallen world (**Luke 12:21**) "**So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.**"

Where should you seek the meaning of life? From where your life originally came from. As a gift from our Almighty Creator God. He blew the breath of life into your nostrils when you were still in your mother's womb. He blessed you with all the gifts you have, all the talents, and all the skills that you use to earn a living and survive in this world. All the things that you have that make and keep you healthy and happy come as gifts of love from Him. Yet when we make the meaning of our life about these gifts, we forget the One who gave it all to us.

It's our natural bent to focus on the things of this world at the expense of our Heavenly Father. It's what our sinful heart does best. But your Heavenly Father is not content to watch you wander off into a life that is filled with vanity and a chasing after the wind. Instead He sent His Son to earth to chase after you. He came to reveal to us the true meaning of life: loving God and loving others. And Jesus showed us in the most graphic way how much love He and the Father love you. He came to take away all your sins, all the ways you make life about anything and everything other than Him. He took all those things to the cross where He suffered and died for them. His love for you was so strong that He willingly endured whatever it might take for you to be declared forgiven. To be declared no longer an enemy of the Father. To be declared in right standing with Him. To make you just as if you always lived your life centered on loving God and loving others. Jesus accomplished that for you. And by faith gives you all the credit for it.

Our sinful hearts still to this day desire to wander away from a life centered on Our Heavenly Father and His Son. We let ourselves wander into the lifestyle of the world around us. We start to see His gifts to us as our entitlement. Ours to do with as we please. But our Heavenly Father refuses to let us wander away into a life that is like striving after the wind. He calls us back by sending to us His Holy Spirit in Baptism. As we must strive and toil and labor in this fallen world that no longer works for us but against us, God's Spirit through the means of grace reminds us that the true meaning of life is found not in

what we hold in our hands but by who holds us in His. When we fall into despair, He uses God's Word to point out our sin, and then as our hearts break He applies the loving and healing medicine of the Gospel. He reminds us that though our hearts seek to wander, His love is so great that He is always calling us back to Himself.

And He uses His Word to instruct us as to a better way to live out our lives in this sinful broken world. He uses the words of Solomon in **Ecclesiastes 2:24** "**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**"²⁵ **for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"** When we see our very lives as a gift from God. When we see that even the products of our labor and toiling are gracious gift from a loving Father. When we see ourselves as His children who don't deserve anything. Then life no longer seems like vanity of vanity. It no longer looks like a striving after the wind. We enjoy our life together not because we have such fantastic gifts, even though we do. Not because we have health and wealth, although most of us have both in an abundance that is not equaled many other places in the world. Our happiness and joy come from whose we are. It comes from the fact that we are beloved children of the Heavenly Father. Children who are promised the most loving and gracious gift of all: eternal life in the New Heaven and New Earth where meaningless toil and existence will never be known again. Children who are blessed in this life with an abundance great enough to care for ourselves, as well as share with those who are still lost in the world. Our loving Father asks us to come along side those who are staring into the abyss of "Life sucks and then you die." He asks us to share that greatest of gifts we have today that never runs out: The Gospel Message. Powered by His Spirit it reveals that the true meaning of life is found only in Jesus' death and resurrection. He wants them to know that by faith the abyss they see as death is just the door that opens to an eternity beyond imagining. And it is the Father's free gift to them, just as it is to you and me.

Life at times still sucks. But when it does, we turn not to what we can produce or hold in our hands. We look not to our attempts to make life heaven on earth. Directed and empowered by Holy Spirit through God's Word (**Colossians 3:2**) "**Set your minds on**

things that are above, not on things that are on earth." We look to our Savior who died and rose again to give to us the true meaning to life: life now lived with Him and eternal life to come. May you this day be called back to find the meaning of your life in Jesus love and faith in His resurrection as your future. Amen.