

This morning we read from one of the strangest, weirdest little books in the Bible. Our OT lesson was taken from the book of Ecclesiastes. And since we only read from Ecclesiastes about once every 6 years¹, I wanted to say a few words about it this morning.

Ecclesiastes is only 8 pages long, but it's the only book in the OT that I know of that has had two #1 rock songs taken from it.²

In the '60's, the Byrds had a gigantic hit covering a rather obscure Pete Seeger folk song, "Turn, Turn, Turn." It was such a huge hit, that even though the Byrds changed the tune slightly, Pete Seeger himself decided to give in and change the way he sang his own song in the future. Everyone knew the Byrds' version of the tune better than the original.

The text of the song was lifted almost verbatim from the 3rd chapter of Ecclesiastes. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, a time to die. A time to plant, a time to reap,"³ etc., etc.

All that was added to scripture by Pete Seeger were the lyrics "Turn, turn, turn," and "I swear it's not too late."

Two decades after the Byrds, John ("Cougar") Mellencamp came out with another Ecclesiastes-inspired song: "Paper in Fire."

This later song, "Paper in Fire," really captures the spirit of Ecclesiastes. In the lesson we read this morning, the writer says, "I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind."⁴

John Mellencamp sings,
*He wanted love with no involvement
so he chased the wind
that's all his silly life required
and the days of vanity went on forever
and he saw his days burn up like paper in fire*

This is the central thrust of Ecclesiastes. The message is that there is a certain emptiness and futility to the way we often try to live our lives. And all our human efforts are often about as substantial as paper burning in the fire.

"All is vanity and a chasing after wind."

Vanity is one of the favorite terms for the writer of Ecclesiastes. The word vanity appears 30 times in the Bible. 27 of those 30 appearances are in Ecclesiastes. The word vanity

¹ There are 2 tracks of Old Testament readings in the summer and fall in our 3-year cycle—and we usually do one 3-year track then the other, thus 6 years to do both.

² Though to be fair, the former was #1 on the very broad Billboard Hot 100, the latter was #1 on the more restrictive Billboard Mainstream Rock chart—it only peaked at #9 on the Billboard Hot 100.

³ Eccl 3:1-2

⁴ Eccl 1:14

implies emptiness, futility, something that does you no good. The Hebrew word implies a breath after it has been exhaled. What is less permanent than a breath after it has gone out of you?

That's what Ecclesiastes says about our lives. Our earthly pursuits, our goals, the things we strive for, ultimately are all empty. They are all vanities: Chasing after pleasure. Trying to amass wealth. Seeking to know all there is to know. Seeking power and prestige. As the writer of Ecclesiastes would say, "All (of these things) are vanity and chasing after the wind... Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Overall, the book of Ecclesiastes is a downer. There is no Good News in the book. In fact, some have suggested that Ecclesiastes is a wonderful picture of what life would be like without the Christian Gospel. So, if your self-esteem is low, if you're depressed, then avoid Ecclesiastes like the plague. Don't even touch it with a 10-foot pole. You'll come away even more depressed.

However, there are times when Ecclesiastes can be quite helpful. In school we learned that the ancient peoples thought that the universe was geocentric, that all the planets and the Sun revolved around the Earth. Copernicus later came along and said, no, the universe was heliocentric, the Earth and all the planets revolve around the Sun.

But so often for many of us, I think our model of the universe is egocentric: everything revolves around me. I am the center of the universe.

Oftentimes it is the great American Heresy. My individual rights are paramount. My own personal experience is definitive and ultimate. There is nothing more important than the pursuit of my own power or pleasure or wealth. My life is defined by the amount of goods and services I can consume. The one who dies with the most toys wins.

If you ever start feeling that way, if you ever start feeling like you're really hot stuff; if you ever start feeling like the world is lucky to have you in it; if you ever start feeling that you're the master or mistress of the universe, I've got a prescription for you. Open a Bible, go straight past Psalms and Proverbs, and read through the 7 or 8 pages of the Book of Ecclesiastes. It will take the egotistical wind right out of your sails.

Towards the end of that book, after all the descriptions of the vanities of our lives, you'll come to the important words, "Remember your creator in the days of your youth."

In other words, remember God now. Don't procrastinate. Don't put your relationship with God on the back burner. Live for God now, because one day you will die. It takes Ecclesiastes 7 very flowery and poetic verses to describe death, but that's the general thrust. One day, you will die, so deal with it now.

That's something we don't like to think about. Our American culture loves to deny death. We often pretend we can live forever.

Even the way we do funerals is a denial of death. We put fake grass-green carpet all around the grave. We inject chemicals into the bodies of our loved ones to keep them from decomposing. We put cosmetics on them so that they look like they're sleeping.

You look at old paintings of funerals or deaths, and the corpse always has the grayish color of death. But we want our dead to look life-like.

In fact, I once knew a funeral director who would ask at cookouts, "How do you want your steak? Well-done, Medium, or Life-like?"

Even when our bodies are well-done and finished, we want them to look fresh and youthful and rare. It's a denial of our mortality.

We often live as if we never plan to die. However, the mortality rate for life on this planet is still right up there at 100%. No one gets out of here alive.

So how do we live our lives? Should we live for ourselves, or for others? Jesus, as he so often does, answers us with a parable. The parable we read this morning from the 12th chapter of Luke is often labeled the Parable of the Rich Fool, which gives you an indication of the type of answer Jesus gives.

A rich man has a farm. He has a good year and a bumper crop. Grain elevators haven't been invented yet, and his silos are full, so he doesn't know what to do with his surplus. He tries to figure out what to do. All of a sudden, the light bulb goes on over his head: '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.'

Notice the focus of his words: I, me, my. No thought of God. No thought of others who might be helped by his grain or his wealth. Instead, he says 'I'll store it so I can live high on the hog for many years to come.'

But then there's the kicker. God basically says, 'Guess what, you're going to die this very night. So what good will all your possessions be?' The answer of course, is "None." You can't take it with you.

Next week, we'll hear Jesus sum up this parable with the words, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."⁵

And we need to constantly ask ourselves, 'Where is my treasure? Where is my heart?'

Do I store things up for myself? Or do I help others? Do I spend my resources only on my own pleasures? Or do I devote part of my resources as a tool to further the work of the Kingdom of God?

⁵ Lk 12:34

Those are difficult questions to ask ourselves, but they're vitally important for our spiritual health.

Asking questions like these can be painful. Answering them can be even more painful. At times it can be like pouring alcohol into a wound. It stings. But it also brings cleansing and healing.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us, if the pursuit of material wealth is the dominating force in our lives, then that is ultimately a vain and empty thing. As Jesus tells us, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."⁶

Our job as Christians is not simply amassing luxuries and possessions for ourselves.

Our primary job is not to seek our own power and prestige.

Instead, our primary job as Christians is to love God totally, with all our heart and mind and soul and strength AND to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Anything else is chasing after the wind.

Anything else is vanity.

⁶ Lk 12:15