

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, 3:1-17

Vanity

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher.
Vanity of vanities!

Yippie. I get to preach on *Ecclesiastes*.
Not a book I would have chosen, but Pastor Rickards had this all figured out well in advance.
Beginning today, through July 26th,
He's been planning a preaching series based on the Wisdom books of the Old Testament and how each of them has shaped his ministry over the entirety of his 46 year career.
You know, get all nostalgic on you :)

But Pastor Rickards was not able to be here this morning;
So, here I am attempting a sermon on *Ecclesiastes*, of all things.
Which is fine. I'm willing to try anything once.
But let me say right up front:
I will *not* be reflecting on any *part* of Pastor Rickards' 46 years of ministry :)

Ecclesiastes, I've learned, is the Greek translation for the Hebrew title *Qoheleth* [pronounced ko-HEHL-ehth],
which refers to someone appointed to stand before the assembly.
Now, assuming you remember your seminary Greek,
you might have recognized, *ecclesia*, meaning assembly,
at the root of the Greek title, *Ecclesiastes*.
The Hebrew title *Qoheleth* is a bit harder to pin down.
Many scholars have translated it *Teacher*,
as in one who *teaches* in the assembly.

Martin Luther, insisted on translating the title as *Preacher*, as in one who speaks with authority.

It makes little difference, whether one thinks of *Qoheleth* as a teacher or preacher or both, the author is nevertheless someone who is steeped in wisdom and rises to speak to the assembly with authority.

And what does the Preacher rise to speak about?

Vanity. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

For as long as I can remember, the vanity of which Ecclesiastes warns has always intrigued me.

It's not the sort of vanity that convinces the gullible they are the most beautiful and interesting people on earth.

No, it is not that sort of vanity at all.

Rather, the Preacher speaks of vanity as something far more ephemeral and fleeting.

Indeed, some biblical scholars argue the word vanity, itself, is a less than adequate translation of the Hebrew word, *hevel*, which means something closer to breath, or, wasted breath.

The author speaks of the seasons of life as going 'round and round seemingly without purpose. The sun rises. The sun goes sets. Then hurries back to its place and rises again.

There is nothing new. What has been will be.

It will come around again and again

One day after another after another.

After a while, it can all start to sound rather monotonous and depressing:

"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."

Truth, I am sure. But depressing nonetheless.

Where, pray tell, is the good news in this passage?

Popular wisdom at the time
held that the good prospered and evil suffered.
But, the Preacher's study of life revealed to him the folly of such
supposed wisdom.
Good people and evil people all ultimately face the same end,
regardless of a person's virtue or lack of it.
Good and evil simply do not get what we think they deserve.
Often times, the very opposite is true.
And it is this sense of meaningless that the author calls vanity.
Indeed, all things in which we place our effort and value,
all the things on which we focus our attention,
all such things are vanity.
One thing you have to give him.
The Preacher tells it like it is.

But the Preacher also insists that life can be so beautiful.
The rhythm of the seasons is beautiful.
The whole of creation is beautiful.
For everything there is a season,
a time for every matter under heaven.
The secret to a joyful life is not worrying about those things over
which we have no control,
but rather to pay attention, in each moment,
to the beauty that is right in front of us.

God has given us wonderful gifts:
work to be busy with, a family to love, an ever-changing natural
landscape, the forest the sea.
The sun rises and sets and comes around again;
whatever God does endures forever.
God created and intended time, the seasons, and all that is
for human pleasure. That we might know joy.

How can we not respond with awe-inspired praise?

I want to close with an ancient story:

"Where shall I look for enlightenment?" the disciple asked.

"Here," the wise one said.

"When will it happen?" the disciple asked.

"It is happening right now," the wise one answered.

"Then why don't I experience it?"

"Because you don't look."

"What should I look for?"

"Nothing. Just look."

"Look at what?"

"At anything your eyes light on."

"But must I look in a special way?"

"No, the ordinary way will do."

"But don't I always look the ordinary way?"

"No, you don't."

"But why ever not?"

"Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else."ⁱ

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Amen.

ⁱ Joan Chittister, *There is a Season*, Orbis Books, 1999.