

VANITY

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

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

July 31, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes only comes up twice in the entire three-year cycle of Scripture readings, so instead of settling on one passage, this reading gives us a sampling of the first two chapters. We'll read chapter 1, verse 2; then verses 12 through 14; and then we'll go to chapter two and read verses 18 through 26. These are the words of King Solomon, the wisest man in the world. Let's see what Solomon learned with all his wisdom. We'll start and chapter 1, verse 2. We read in Jesus' name.

² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

¹² I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 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. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

^{2:18} 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, ²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ 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.

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? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2).

What does that mean? What is vanity? Is it vain to think this sermon is about you? No. Not at all. You should think this sermon is about you. It's about you and your vain life. What does that mean? What is vanity? Is it vanity plates? You know, those personalized license plates that make everyone wonder why you're late for an appointment with the DNR, and why you need to tell

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everyone about it. Is that vanity? There's nothing wrong with vanity plates, but they are vain, along with your car, and the garage you park it in, and all the vain places you go in it during your vain life. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." What does that mean? What is vanity? Is it vain to put makeup on a face that's just going to get wrinkly anyway? Yeah, because, not only is that face going to get wrinkly, but eventually you're going to die, and all that skin is just going to fall right off. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Last summer, not this summer, but the one before, I was at our Annual Conference. And during one of the breaks I was playing whiffle ball on the lawn with some other pastors. That's really what we do at these things. And I don't know why, but some guy walked by and shouted "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." We looked at him for a second, and then we kept playing. Then, when I went into the next session and sat down, this guy asked if he could talk to me after the session. I thought, "This should be interesting." Turns out, he wanted to talk about something else entirely, and I never figured out if he was joking, or serious, or yelling at something else. But that was vanity too, because it's all vanity. In the end, it won't matter that Jon can hit a plastic ball harder than I can. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." What does that mean? What is vanity?

We usually use the word "vanity" to mean self-absorbed or narcissistic. That's what the song is about, and that's what the magazine is about. And being self-absorbed is a form of vanity, because we're going to die, just like everything else in this vain world.

But the word vanity means more than simply being self-absorbed or narcissistic. In Ecclesiastes, King Solomon calls just about everything vanity. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The word in Hebrew actually means a mist or a vapor. Think of how impermanent and fleeting a mist or a vapor is. It's like the steam coming off a cup of coffee. A slight breeze blows it away and it's gone. And even just a few minutes after you pour that cup of coffee, it's not even hot enough to make steam anymore. A mist or a vapor is about the least substantial thing you can think of. The wind blows, and it's gone. That's all we are. We're not even dust in the wind, because dust eventually settles somewhere. A mist or a vapor is blown by the wind and it's gone. It just gets absorbed into the wind. That's all our lives are. We're insignificant. And all our striving is vanity. We're a mist or a vapor or a scent in the wind. Now your life may be the smell of an apple pie cooling on a window sill in the summertime, or you may be a fart in the wind. It doesn't really matter, because the wind blows and you're gone. We're not even the apple pie or, you know, the thing that makes the fart. We're just the smell of the thing. The wind blows and we're gone. And people may be sad when we're gone, or they may be happy when we're gone, but that doesn't matter either, because all those people are the same thing: a vapor in the wind, and they will soon be gone too. And pretty soon, no one will remember that we ever existed. You'll be a name on a tombstone that's sinking into the ground, with grass growing over the edges, and people walk on it at someone else's burial.

People worry about how they'll be remembered after they die. That's vanity. We won't be remembered. If you have children, they'll remember you for a while, but they're going to die too. If you have grandchildren, they might remember you, but not as well. Three of my four grandparents lived long enough for me to meet them. And I remember them, but my children won't remember them, just like I know almost nothing about my great-grandparents. My parents told me about them, and some of the stories are interesting, but they don't really mean much to me, because I never knew them. I don't even remember their names. That's how it is for all of us. We die, and within a generation or two, we're forgotten. And if a person lives long enough, they might even be forgotten before they die. It's kind of interesting, the longer a person lives,

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the smaller their funeral becomes, because they've outlived the people that remember them. It doesn't take long. Within a generation or two, we're all forgotten.

You might think that in the digital age, it will be easier for our offspring to remember us. They can hear our voices, they can see us on video. But they won't. They won't pay attention to us, because they will think their generation is more important than ours, just like we think our generation is more important than the ones before us. This is vanity.

Or you might think that you will be significant if you leave something substantial behind. King Solomon was wise enough to see through that deceptive dream. "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, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?" (2:18-19). Solomon was the wisest and wealthiest man in the world. But his fear became reality. His son, Rehoboam, was a fool. And the same year Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel was divided, and only two of the twelve tribes remained with the foolish son. Everything Solomon toiled for was gone.

I also know of a man who left a million dollars to an organization that he loved. Fifteen years later, that organization became the complete opposite of what he loved.

In the Gospel lesson (Luke 12:13-21), Jesus told a parable of a rich man who had such a great crop, that he had nowhere to store it. So he tore down his barns and built bigger ones. He spent part of his wealth just so he could store the rest of it. He thought this would give him security for years to come. And he didn't even have anyone to share it with. He was his own god, so he cared only for his own life. He uses the word "I" six times, and the word "my" five times. "I, I, I, I, I, I. My, my, my, my, my." It's kind of funny, the only time he uses the word "you" is when he's talking to himself. He says, **"And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'"** (12:19). He's alone in his devotion to himself. And this is vanity, because God says to him, **"Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"** (12:20). It's a question without an answer. He doesn't even know. He can't use it anymore, and he doesn't have anyone to leave it to. This is vanity. All is vanity. You can spend your whole life building something, but then you die, and what becomes of it? You may not even know. And even if you do know who it will pass to, you don't really know what they will do with it. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

We might struggle to understand Ecclesiastes. We might even be offended by it. Because it seems like about 93% of the book is just like this. Your life is a meaningless existence. Nothing really matters. That's the message that fills most of the book. But King Solomon is taking us on a journey. He takes us through his own journey to find meaning.

Early in his reign, Solomon asked the LORD for wisdom, and the LORD made him the wisest man in the world (1 Kings 3). But Solomon despaired of his wisdom. He became wise enough to realize that wisdom is also vanity. He said, "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:18). There are two kinds of wisdom that Solomon speaks of in Ecclesiastes. The first kind is natural wisdom. It's trying to figure out the scheme of things, the way things work, why people do the stupid things they do. To Solomon, this kind of wisdom was a sorrow. Sure, it was a benefit to the kingdom to have a wise king, but not as much as we might think. And to Solomon, his wisdom vexed him. The smarter he got, the more he saw that everyone is stupid, and we do stupid things, and there was nothing he could do about it. So his wisdom only made him sorrowful.

Then in chapter 2 he describes all the other things he tried. He gave his heart to pleasure, laughter, and wine. It was vanity (2:1-3).

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So he made great works. He built houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, and pools. He bought servants, herds, and flocks. He gathered silver and gold. He got singers and concubines. He became wealthier than anyone before him, but it was vanity (2:4-11).

So he turned again to consider wisdom and folly, but he only saw that the same event befalls the wise and the foolish (2:12-17). You die, and your big brain turns to dust.

But there is a second kind of wisdom, and this fills the other 7% of the book. There are these brief sections where Solomon seems to contradict himself. Right after he says, “I hated all my toil in which I toiled under the sun” (2:18), he goes on to say, “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” (2:24). That’s weird, right? Eating, drinking, toil. These are the exact same things that Solomon called “vanity.” He gave his heart to these things and found no joy in them. But then he tells us to enjoy them.

Here’s the difference; here’s the key that changes everything: He says, “This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” In these brief sections where Solomon turns from despair to peaceful hopefulness, it’s always because he sees these vain things as the gift of God. To say something is vanity does not mean it is bad. It may be bad or it may be good, but vanity means something different. It simply means that something is fleeting. It’s temporary. It’s a vapor in the wind. It may be a good vapor or a bad vapor, but it’s passing away. And if we set our hopes on a mist or a vapor, we will also despair. But if we set our hopes on the Giver, then we can enjoy these vain things all the days of our vain lives. And when the vain things blow away, we won’t despair. And when our vain existence is likewise blown away, we won’t despair, because we have set our hope on the one person in the universe who is not vanity: the Triune God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. He is not a vapor. He is the true substance, and he gives substance to all things. So when the vain gifts pass away, the Giver remains, and he gives new and greater gifts. We look forward to the substance of a new heavens and a new earth, which is yours through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So the book of Ecclesiastes is all about the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” And Luther’s catechism explanation fits perfectly. “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” Because everything else is vanity. The problem with trusting these other gods is that they cannot save us. The problem with setting our hopes on the vain things of this life is that they are just that: vanity. They are a vapor in the wind. And so are our lives. But if our lives are hidden with Christ in God, then he will bring us into the true substance.

So here’s the end of the matter: “Fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13). And look to the true substance. “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3-4). So do good instead of evil. Enjoy your vain toil and enjoy the vain fruits of your toil all the days of your vain life, because it’s passing away like a vapor. And trust your Savior to bring you into the substance of his new creation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.