

11th Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Daniel Joyner Miller
July 31st, 2016

When my wife was ordained to the ministry two years ago I gave her three pieces of religious artwork. The three pieces are all by the same artist, Joseph Novak. He is a Presbyterian pastor and graphic artist. As an artistic endeavor and as an act of personal piety Joseph Novak chose to take all of the books of the bible and create a single graphic which would capture what he interpreted as the essence of the particular book. What he made are colorful, abstract, and often thought provoking. He calls his works collectively *The Minimum Bible*.

In case you are wondering what these unique works of art look like, I have brought a few to share with you. Real quick art lesson.

This first one we have here is his minimalist representation of St. Paul's first letter to the congregation at Thessalonica. In its brief 5 chapters the letter has a lot of light and dark/day and night imagery hence the half moon and half sun image: for instance 2:9 "you remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day...while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God;" or 5:4 " you

beloved, are not in darkness...for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.” Nice uplifting sentiment.

Ok second one. This one is more obvious. It is the minimalist representation of the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is a love poem written by a would-be bridegroom to his beautiful bride. The whole poem is full of lavish praises of the woman’s beauty. In the picture we have the silhouette of a woman with hair made from musical notes of many vibrant colors. Novak is trying to represent that this woman’s beauty is expressed in the words and notes of the song itself.

And now the third and the real reason we are having this mini art lesson. Along with the images of the people of the day and the music of love, sitting on our walls is another image, with a seemingly less uplifting message. The third minimalist picture I give you is from the book of Ecclesiastes, our first reading that we heard today. In this picture there is an hour glass of sand in the middle, representing the unrelenting passage of time, around which there are four arrows ringing the outside pointing in a circular motion, one to the next to the next to the next to the next, in an unending circle. This encapsulates what the Teacher tells us in Ecclesiastes “Vanity O vanity, all is vanity and chasing after the wind.” The hourglass will drop sand, time will pass, nothing we can do will stop it. All is

vanity. This generation will fade away. Wisdom will pass away. All is vanity. Your wealth will become dust. All of your toil, strain, and hard work is to no avail. The seasons will point to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next. The sands of time will slip away. All is vanity and chasing after the wind.

For me, these unstoppable sands of time, pictured here in Ecclesiastes, are the same ones that the poet Percy Shelley wrote about in his famous poem Ozymandias, which I remember reading in high school. In the poem Shelley tells of a traveler in the desert who stumbles across the broken pieces of a statue of once great King Ozymandias stuck haphazardly in the desert sand, a pair of legs, a shattered face with a sneer of superiority, and lastly a pedestal, which reads “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” And we are supposed to ask what works? In the poem nothing else around the broken statue remains. The desert has swallowed up everything of the king he ever done, just as Ecclesiastes told us, the sands of time are once again victorious, for as far as the eye can see stretching to the horizon in all directions. Vanity O Vanity. All is as pointless as chasing after the wind.

Legend has it that of all people it was another king who was the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, which makes it ironic that any king could understand the

fleetingness of human conceptions of greatness when considering the tragic fate of the great king Ozymandias. It was once believed that great King Solomon, the son of King David, the king who built the great temple in Jerusalem, who built a lavish temple made from the cedars of Lebanon, the grandest trees in the ancient world, who ruled over the greatest kingdom the Jews ever knew both in geographic extent and in peace and prosperity, who was the wisest person in the world, wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. Legend, however, says that he wrote this late in life, at the end of his years of rule. Could these be the words of a king who realized as many do close to death that even the rich and powerful one day, just like everyone else return to the ground, ashes to ashes; dust to dust? Biblical scholars doubt the premise that Solomon actually wrote this text, and they are probably right but a part of me likes to picture the wise old king who realizes after a lifetime of labor that all people no matter how rich or poor share the same fate.

I wonder if King Ozymandias, in his final days, realized this like Solomon did. I wonder if Ozymandias, who proclaimed himself King of Kings, realized the absurdity of the claim he made when, as a young man, he had his statue carved and placed before his subjects. I wonder...probably not.

So it is with all self-proclaimed King of Kings, they think that they can save themselves. But today we also heard that the one who we proclaim to be the King of Kings, who we know to be the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords, knew about the truth of the sands of time. In our reading from Luke, Jesus echoes what we heard in Ecclesiastes in his parable this morning about the Rich Fool. The Rich Fool, like Ozymandias, pridefully erected testaments to his power, richness, and greatness. Having too much food for one person the rich fool thinks, “well I will build bigger houses to store it all. Having more will make me happier.” But like Ozymandias’ statue, like Solomon’s kingdom, which stretched from the Euphrates to Egypt, the Rich Fool’s wealth is nothing more than the sand that passes through the hourglass. It will not come with him to the grave.

And so it is for us too. All those things that we give ultimate importance in our lives, our career, our money, the things that we would build bigger houses to store it all in, is really just the dust and sand of the desert.

If this is true, isn’t it this a little morbid and nihilistic that my wife and I have this picture up in our living room, a reminder of our own fleeting life, a reminder that all things, that we too, are nothing more than dust and sand?

But where does this drumming on and on about the sands of time and non being leave us. Where is the gospel message of God's grace and love within this world of broken statues and shadows of nothingness? Why strive for justice? Why clothe the naked? Why stand up for the persecuted and down trodden? Why love your enemy? Why show up to church on Sunday? Why live at all if nothing will last? If everything is vanity? If everything is like chasing after the wind?

Well friends, ultimately the message of Ecclesiastes and Jesus' parable is not a message of the meaninglessness of life. Instead, if we go back to the desert, find the lost torso of Ozymandias, and crack open that ancient stone and open it up we will actually find the beating heart of the Gospel. Because what Shelley and King Solomon and Jesus give us with these three stories is perspective. Jesus says it quite explicitly, the riches of this world will not last. They are not what is important so do not give them the importance in your life that we are guilty of doing. The richness that matters most is your richness in the one true and eternal, the only one, true, and eternal this world knows, and that is God and God's message of love and grace and forgiveness and justice. For love and grace and forgiveness and justice is God's enduring legacy in this world and it must be ours as well, for it is the only thing that will be there when we are gone.

But what then of those things that we have given ourselves over to that are not God? What about a desire to be richer, to be more successful, to be more satisfied with the things of this world? Well summarizing the 20th century poet, philosopher, playwright, GK Chesterton: once we see everything in light of God's love and grace and forgiveness, and justice, we can actually learn to love the things of this world better than we ever could before. With proper perspective we can love them without clinging to them, without expecting too much of them, without giving them more importance than they are supposed to have over our lives. Think how much disappointment and heartache could be avoided if we only learned this truth. All things are vanity is ultimately a liberating message. If all things are vanity except for God then you don't have to cling to those things, money, and job, and respect, and success and expect total satisfaction from any of them or let them define who you are. Ultimately we know that we are known and loved by a gracious and eternal God of all seasons and all times. And even the sands of time cannot cover this radical good news.

His name is Jesus, King of Kings, look on his works, ye mortals, and rejoice and live the life properly aligned to God and the things of this world.

Amen