

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Tom Gehring

July 31, 2022

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Love and our Permanence. Amen.

- “Vanity of Vanities,” says the book of Ecclesiastes. Everything is vanity and a chasing after wind.”
 - The first time I encountered the text from Ecclesiastes, our Old Testament reading for this Sunday, I remember thinking “what the heck is this doing in the bible?”
 - It seems so out of place. Nestled amongst books of justice-fueled prophecy, the centuries-long story of God’s relationship with the nation of Israel, and collections of proverbial wisdom for leading a godly life, to hear such sentiments of despair, nihilism, and what appears to be hopelessness feels.....off.
 - It’s certainly a departure in tone and theme from what we might expect to hear from readings from the Old Testament.
 - And yet, I consistently find Ecclesiastes to be a welcome and almost refreshing dose of honesty and realism in the bible that never fails to be timely.
 - The book is essentially the musings of a wise-man named Qoheleth as he reflects on his life’s endeavors.
- There’s a translation of the bible called “The Bible Abridged Beyond the Point of Usefulness”
 - Back in 2015, cartoon artist Zach Weinersmith set out to reduce every book of the bible down to 2 or 3 sentences in a sort of summary. It’s no small endeavor to set out on, and the end result is actually rather entertaining.
 - The reason I bring it up is because the version of Ecclesiastes has always stuck with me.
 - So, here is the book of Ecclesiastes, abridged beyond the point of usefulness:
 - “The great wise man and king, Qoheleth, wants you to know that he has literally had every pleasure desirable, but he still has a lot of complaints.”
 - It’s a funny take on a weird little book of the bible but also falls victim to an unfortunate mistake that many folks make when they encounter the words of Ecclesiastes.
 - We’re sadly limited in the English language translations of the original Hebrew,

- Because, with all the talk of vanity, meaninglessness, and chasing after wind it very well can seem like Ecclesiastes is a book of one man's complaints, forever immortalized in the Holy Bible.
 - However, the word that gets translated as "vanity" in Hebrew is "Hebel"
 - The more literal translations of this word are "vapor, mist, or air" and it truly sounds like what it means. "Hebel"
 - So, ecclesiastes is less a story of one man spiraling into nihilism, and more so one man's exposition as he realizes that nothing truly lasts beyond our own lifetimes
 - No acquisition of wealth, no amount of tireless work, no hedonist indulgence in the world's pleasures will result in any kind of deep or intrinsic sense of self-worth.
 - Instead, the only thing that awaits is hebel. The transitory vaporous reality that all things we experience and do are impermanent and fleeting.
- This still might sound like hopeless nihilism, but one of my former classmates, Amy Courts, wrote one of the best takes on this book I have ever come across that helps refocus our gaze and start to make sense of what exactly it is that Qoheleth is saying:
 - She writes "Ecclesiastes is only a confusing mess of self-contradictory babble if you fail to see that Qoheleth is a rich & powerful man of privilege speaking to other rich & powerful people of privilege who've piled up the bodies of the oppressed, poor, and exploited and climbed them like a ladder to the "top" where they'll find nothing but "hebel"
 - Vapor, air.
 - He's got nothing but "sorrow and grief" for all he's done, acquired, learned, and seen.
 - And what exactly does he see from up there? Bodies and blood, sacrifices made in futility to the god of wealth and power, which insulates no one from the fury of the earth or the finality of death.
 - The more he learns, the more grieved he is – not by the vanity or meaninglessness of wisdom (which is what so many white translators would have us think), but by the knowledge of his own evil and its impact on the poor and powerless.
 - Qoheleth's words are a scathing indictment against . . . the gluttony of the privileged whose ease [of life] is enjoyed at the expense of the oppressed."
- Amy's interpretation is, in my opinion, spot on in its assessment of the social location Qoheleth, the wise man and king, speaks from.
 - It's not so much that he's writing a book full of complaints after a cushy life of riches and pleasure

- But a book full of the grief and sorrow of a many who has finally come to realize that his accomplishments and riches will not last beyond his own life, and that others have suffered while he has hoarded goods for himself.
- I mentioned earlier that Ecclesiastes, as I have encountered it, always seems to be a book of the bible that is timely and apropos regardless of what events are unfolding in the public sphere.
 - This trend has continued, as we hear the words in the midst of continued economic hardships.
 - Every morning on the news I hear headlines of record inflation, the lack of living wages and the struggles of the average person to afford basic necessities like gas, food, baby formula, and the like.
 - And yet, I also hear how most corporations continue to post record profits quarter after quarter, continuing an unsettling trend since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.
 - When the majority of people struggled to make ends meet, the wealthy few have and continue to hoard wealth and belongings for themselves
- How very appropriate, then, that we heard the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke earlier.
 - “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”
 - He then goes on to tell a parable of a man whose land produced more crops than usual.
 - And, instead of passing the abundance on to those in need, the man decides to tear down his barns and storage buildings to make even bigger ones so that he can stockpile all of his goods and enjoy a life of luxury.
 - This is the American dream, right? To pull ourselves up and carve out a life of wealth and luxury, such that with enough work, cunning, and conviction, anyone might climb the ladder to a life of wealth among the successful elite.
 - Yet God has an answer to this manner of thinking:
 - “You fool!” God says. “This very night your life is being demanded of you (in other words you will die tonight) The things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Do you think you can take them with you after you die?
- Today’s scripture readings stand as a stark reminder that the sin that God most consistently despises across all books of the bible is the acquisition of wealth at the expense of others.
 - I can’t help but think about how this makes sense, given the era we live in

- We are far removed from the social and economic contexts that Qoheleth and Jesus lived in, and yet their words ring true
 - Every day we experience firsthand the end results of extreme personal acquisition.
 - As humanity expends the Earth's resources faster than She can replenish them, sea water levels rise, The UK just experienced the hottest temperatures ever recorded, massive wildfires in California, Canada, Australia, Colorado and beyond have gone from noteworthy news to a seasonal expectation. And diseases that are deadly and aggressive pop up with more frequency
- The world's economies produce enough food, water, and goods to provide for all people and yet we are in an era of extreme wealth and resource inequality.
 - While the words of Qoheleth are always a timely reminder of the vaporous nature of wealth and property, I think we also need to hear them in tandem with the words of Jesus.
- From the 10th chapter of the gospel of Luke, Jesus answers the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life" by saying
 - "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself"
- When we love in the manner of Christ, we can help make sure that all people might not just survive, but also thrive.
 - Truly the only thing that keeps life from being nothing more than a vaporous impermanence, is the act of loving one another as Christ loved.
 - May we all be moved to living out this love, such that it might become a radically permanent fixture in a world of transience.
- In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.