

“Meaning Making”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 7, 2020

1st Sunday after Pentecost Rev. John Wahl Ecclesiastes 1:1-3, 9:1-10

For ten weeks during this summer, we will be looking at the Five Forgotten Books of the Old Testament Bible: Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Song of Songs, Ruth and Esther – also known as the five scrolls – because, in Jewish traditions, each one is assigned to be read in association with a particular annual holiday. These five scrolls, which have so enriched the tradition of Judaism, have been largely overlooked by the Christian church. As author Robert Williamson says, “they are gathering dust at the margins of the biblical canon. They have been forgotten.”¹ And yet, they represent some of the voices in scripture that are not often heard; they are out of the mainstream and challenge readers with different perspectives and beliefs.

We begin today with the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: sometimes best recognized as the inspiration for *The Byrds* song of the sixties, “Turn, Turn, Turn.” Next Sunday, we will take a closer look at that passage from chapter 3, “For everything there is a season, and a time...” Today, though, we explore the central theme of the book, and the question posed in the opening verses about discovering life’s meaning; we will then turn to the second portion of the reading from chapter 9, when the author proffers a possible answer to this question: a way to live even under the cloud of our mortality.

Ecclesiastes was probably one of the last books written in the Old Testament canon, likely in the 3rd century BC. We don’t know the identity of the author, who only refers to himself as “the Teacher of the Assembly;” also translated as “the Gatherer” or “the Preacher;” *Qoholet* in Hebrew and *Ecclesiastes* in Greek. In the opening verse, and at other places in the book, this unnamed author imagines himself as King Solomon, David’s Son, who would have lived seven centuries earlier: regarded in Jewish history as the paradigm of someone who has it all: including the most wisdom, wives and wealth.

¹ Robert Williamson, *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*, introduction

But even for someone like King Solomon, the Teacher says, “everything is nonsense.” You may know the more traditional translation of this verse: “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” Not vanity as in not being able to look away from your image in the mirror, but a sense that life is empty and temporary: an absurdity. The root word means that life is like a vapor or mist; that it’s similar to seeing your breath on a cold morning; you can’t control or contain it; and before you know it, it’s gone.

If the second verse is the answer, the third verse states the question: what do people gain from all their hard work? The term here for gain is an economic one: the Teacher is asking about the profit margin, a balance sheet. When you compare the effort we expend to what we gain, the end result reveals what the previous verse told us: in the long term, when all has been said and done: all is vanity; everything is nonsense.

How does a message like this find its way into scripture, we might wonder? And what are we to draw from it? First, it is important to remember what will be made clear in the second part of today’s reading: that the author has no understanding or belief in an afterlife. All people, whether righteous or evil, success or failure, faithful worshipper or not; everyone receives the same fate when their life ends. They all go to *Sheol*, the land of the dead: not an afterlife but a dark, resting place from which there is no return. While this is not the uniform belief of all people of faith – and certainly not for Christians – it is an important voice to hear; one that we sometimes like to imagine does not exist, but nevertheless is real. Is there any point to life, some people wonder, is there anything to be gained; or is it all pointless in the end?

And so, Ecclesiastes can help to give us a window into questions about life’s meaning and the sense of hopelessness that many people experience. It helps to assure us that there is space in the community of faith for those who need to engage in these questions; that doubt is not a disqualifier from the practices of religious traditions. This skepticism can even be helpful to remind us that God is not simply a tool for our personal whims, but that finding life’s meaning is an ongoing and even life-long enterprise.

In chapter 9, the Teacher returns to this question about the profit margin of life; restating his analysis that the same fate of *Sheol* awaits the good and the bad. And as time passes, the world will not remember you after you have died; like that

fleeting breath, it dissipates. The Teacher is clear that we live in the face of the grave: that there is no ‘happily ever after.’

Thus, the message of hope we can discover here is that in the midst of our life, in the situation where we find ourselves, we should find enjoyment in what we do. “Eat your food joyfully and drink your wine happily,” he says, “because God has already accepted what you do.” This is not the same folly of “eat, drink and be merry” that Jesus decries in his parable about the rich man who tore down his barns to build even bigger ones; the one who was storing up for a rainy day. Here, instead, The Teacher in Ecclesiastes is saying that because there is no guarantee that tomorrow will come, we should find joy in what we have been given – and what we have been given to do – today.

And some of what we have been given to do – as The Teacher describes it – are things like keeping our clothes clean and loving our family. We are to do what we are capable of doing here and now because, after death, our knowledge, wisdom and talents no longer have value. God has given each of us particular blessings and gifts meant to be put to use; not saved for the proverbial rainy day which may never come.

Despite his insistence on the vanity, or senselessness, of our lives, The Teacher points us to consider what – and who – we most value. If we indeed live in the face of mortality, knowing that our lives may come to an end without any warning, then how are we going to use the days that we are given? Will it be to spend time with friends; or to pursue a particular passion or work for justice? What, you might ask yourself, does a good day look like for you? Are there certain essentials, things that you simply can’t live without: the sound of birds singing, time for quiet meditation, finding ways to laugh or to love?²

This morning, just as The Teacher prescribes, we are going to eat and drink together; and as we do, we will be remembering that Jesus serves as our teacher. His words remind us that through this holy sacrament of communion, we are joining ourselves with the body of Christ that gathers and serves in obedience to his call upon our lives. We remember that we are called to love God and our neighbors by pursuing peace and justice. As people have been gathering day after day for nearly two weeks now – in marches and protests around the country and around the world – to express their solidarity in pursuit of a common goal, we also

² Robert Williamson and Amy Roberston, *Bibleworm Podcast*

gather together in spirit to claim our common ministry to the good news of Christ's gospel message. And though we eat and drink today in the sanctuary of our own homes, we are still being joined as one by Christ into a common faith and purpose.

And because God sent his son not to condemn, but to save us, we are able to come to the sacrament of communion today with a living hope that our lives are only senseless, vanity, until we find meaning in the form of courageous acts of faith.³ For Christians, the selfless resolve of Jesus and his journey to the cross and beyond enlivens us; it offers us the path and promise of new life now and in the eternal. And as we see the face of Jesus in others – those who live with the same faith and courage as Christ – we are reminded that while the balance sheet of life may not show a net positive for us as individuals, we have been made more than just ourselves; we are now one with Christ and his body on earth; the sacred gathering of those who God creates, blesses and loves.

So, today we will eat and drink. And in these daily activities – like in the work that we are given to do – sometimes we will find enjoyment. But, we are also a part of something that is larger than ourselves: our meaning is made known, at least in part, through the way that this body of Christ, recreated in his image, loves and serves the world in justice and peace. May we proclaim – as so many people gathering in our streets have been doing – that God wants the world to experience peace and justice today, and for each of us to do our particular part in making that vision become reality. Amen.

³ W. Sibley Towner from *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, vo. 5