

Ecclesiastes 2:18 - 3:8
04 August 2013

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So, here's what we missed (heard) last week: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Maybe not the best of all possible translation. The stuff I consulted suggested smoke, mist instead of vanity. In other words, it's all pointless, ephemeral, meaningless, temporary, here for a moment and then gone with the wind. If Proverbs is the happy, positive side of Old Testament wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes is definitely the dark side.

To read from a different translation: "And I hated everything I'd accomplished and accumulated on this earth. It's all smoke. The best you can do with your life is have a good time and get by the best you can."

Some of the difference between these two books of Scripture and these two perspectives might be chronological age. Proverbs is written for the young, the often optimistic, anything is possible, life holds boundless possibilities young. So Proverbs is written in that spirit. It gives good, basic advice. Follow this advice and you'll be better off than if you don't. Even the counter-intuitive and counter-cultural stuff. Honestly, you're better off if you follow that. And if you do that, if you live the way Proverbs calls you to live, you'll find that what Proverbs says works out, turn out to be true—most of the time, maybe 80 or 90, maybe even 95% of the time.

But not always. A recent reading from Proverbs blithely proclaimed, "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." I'll argue with that. Now, it's certainly true that a slack hand can and does lead to poverty. Though this is not always the case for the privileged who have multiple resources from which to draw. Their slack hands do not lead to poverty. And it seems clear to me that diligence does not necessarily make one rich. There are plenty of people who work hard but remain poor through bad luck, poor decisions or because, being surrounded by poverty, they just don't have access to better resources.

Rolf Jacobson, a professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, says you can't argue backwards. He says this based on his own experience. When he was a teenager he contracted a cancer that led to his legs being amputated. Someone asked his mother if she felt guilty that she didn't feed him enough fruits and vegetables because, of course, if she had, he wouldn't have gotten the cancer. Wrong. You can't argue backwards. Or as Job rightly concluded, "There is no reason why God did this to me."

Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of someone who has lived long, has seen a lot, and has noticed that life isn't always so fair, so cut and dried, so black and white. He or she looks back on his life and says, "I wonder if there was any point to all that. I mean, when I go, what will happen to this estate I have been building, to all this stuff I have accumulated? Half of it will probably get thrown out. And my estate will pass on to those who might use it wisely or might foolishly throw it away. Did all my efforts and all my striving mean anything?"

Those just might be questions a fair number of us have asked of ourselves. The writer of Ecclesiastes answers them most cynically—at least at first. “And I hated everything I’d accomplished and accumulated on this earth. It’s all smoke.”

But the writer doesn’t end with cynicism. Instead he celebrates the normal moments of everyday life because he sees that they are good gifts from God. First, there is good in the simple art of living well: loving one’s work, one’s family, and one’s food. There is value, the writer says, in finding joy in the ordinary things of life. This art of finding joy in the ordinary comes with knowing that we are living in the presence of God.

A second bit of wisdom that the writer offers is the wisdom that teaches that there are many seasons in human life. The most famous of the writer’s wisdom, to every thing there is a season, invites us to live life keeping eternity in mind. Neither highs nor lows last; harvest requires sowing, laughter can follow weeping, and silence can lead to speech.

Annie Lennox captures this spirit in her song “Primitive,” part of which says, “Sweetheart Take me to bed That’s where all our prayers are said Whispered silent in the night That’s how all our dreams take flight Let them all go by. For time will catch us in both hands To blow away like grains of sand Ashes to ashes rust to dust This is what becomes of us Sweetheart Send me to sleep Pray to God our hopes to keep Take our fears and make us strong Lead us to where we belong. And let it all go by.”

There’s one more important thing to say from our Christian faith. Our understanding of eternity is that we have a sure and certain place in it. Our final fate is sealed, and it’s a good one. There is no continuing city on this earth, but there is a heavenly one and we are bound for it.

And in the meantime, God meets us in our most meaningless and lost and desperate moments. When we come face to face with our most meaningless, lost, and desperate moments, God meets us in the foolishness of the cross. When we are faced with our worst moments God meets us face to face in Jesus crucified—and risen and reigning and waiting to welcome us home.

“To every thing there is a season.” When my father died I told his pastor that my dad had lived a good, long life, and that though it sounded like a cliché, it was just his time. His pastor then said to me, “That’s not a cliché, that’s faith.” It takes faith to say, “To everything there is a season and a time,” faith that behind all the seasons and all the times of this transient world there is the eternal God. As Ecclesiastes puts it, “I know that whatever God does endures forever, nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it.” And what God has done is to send the Son born into this world of times and seasons as a human being. That Son spoke and did the word and work of God. And when the time had come, the Son, Jesus, freely took the death we placed upon him so that sins might be forgiven and the gulf between us and our eternal God might be filled in. That’s what God has done, and whatever God does endures forever.