

“Ecclesiastes: All Is Vanity”
Ecclesiastes 2:9-16, 7:29, 9:9-17;
Galatians 5:13-14; Matthew 20:20-28

November 13, 2016
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Are you on a quest? When I think of the word “quest” I think about Frodo and the quest he was on. He was on a quest to get rid of something. The quest I’m thinking about is more a quest *for* something. As we live our lives are we on a quest? Are we trying to get somewhere, to do something, to achieve something?

I think in many ways, as I try to live through life, there’s a way that I try to become someone. Oftentimes in the present day there are a lot of perspectives on what it means to become someone. I just read a book for the class I’m doing at Gonzaga in *Spiritual Direction* that suggested that today we try to become someone by becoming an individual. There’s a push towards individualism. We’re supposed to do everything on our own. That’s one piece.

The second piece the book was looking at was today oftentimes we decide if we’re making progress by looking at whether we’re doing as well as the people next to us, whether we’re keeping up with the Joneses. It is suggesting that we use envy and desire, and look at others to see if we’re progressing, if we’re achieving.

Finally, it says we have this superficial optimism—this idea that we should be able to do anything. We have an expectation that we should be able to do anything. Most of us have lived long enough to realize that that’s probably overly optimistic. But those are some of the things that this book says shape us, tell us how to achieve on this quest we’re on.

I was thinking about that because as I look at Ecclesiastes, the fellow who is named in Ecclesiastes is *Qoheleth*. This Hebrew word is sometimes translated as “preacher.” Sometimes it’s recognized as “a gatherer of things.” That makes sense—he’s trying to gather wisdom. Eugene Peterson translates it *Quester*. He’s on this quest to become the wisest person around, to learn how to live. That’s his quest, and he’s doing it in part by recognizing in the society he lives in, maybe a couple millennia ago or more, what it meant to succeed.

One of the things he thought was that he could try to become the wisest person. He was on a quest for wisdom. He’s looking at how he can be the wisest person, and that is to say the best person around, and know it all. He wanted to be a know-it-all.

Secondly, he said to himself, “Let me try pleasure, as well.” He happened to be, it looks like, somebody who is in the upper status of his time, maybe a king, so he had that right. He could do whatever he wanted to do. What he found as he did that, as he gathered that wisdom together, was that it wasn’t clear that it was giving him exactly what he was looking for. His quest wasn’t achieving what he wanted. He kept running up against the idea that God is present and God is doing things. Somehow it feels, in a

way, that his quest was to become parallel with God, to have that kind of wisdom and control. Yet, as he does that he begins to struggle. He wanted to have it all. Does that sound familiar—to want to have it all?

His attempt to have it all will lead somewhere. Let's follow along as we read about some of the things he found as he tried to have it all. He said, "I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which is far off and deep, very deep, who can find it out?" (Chapter 7) He looked around and said, "I saw that under the sun, the race was not to the swift nor the battle to the strong, nor the bread to the wise, nor the riches to the intelligent." He was wondering, "Why doesn't this just work the way I want it to?"

He's got that story about the city under siege and the poor wise man who is able to save the city. He recognizes that wisdom was really important, but afterwards, the wise man stays a poor man. He struggles with all of that. He sees oppression and he sees the suffering of people, and he doesn't understand it. It doesn't fit with the wisdom he's learning. He becomes a bit disillusioned. He says, "Here I am powerful, beginning to have all this wisdom, and yet I'm going to have the same fate as all these fools that I see. What is the end? I'll die, just like the fools die."

He becomes disillusioned. He says, "What's the point of it all?" That's when he starts saying things like all is vanity; it's like chasing after the wind. That's one of the reasons I think we don't like to read Ecclesiastes that well, although it stays one of those books that people keep bringing up in different ways. We can find out that there's nothing new under the sun, and there's a time for everything, and for everything there is a season. But we, at least I, don't like this idea that all is vanity and all is chasing after the wind. When he says "vanity" the word there can mean a vapor or smoke. So I think his problem is that he can see that there's something, or he can feel the wind and he doesn't have control over it. He, as an individual, can't gain mastery over it. He can't know that he's better than everybody else. He becomes disillusioned and asks, "What's the point?"

I think it's easy to get disillusioned in our own world, in our own time. The achievements we're expected to achieve, the ways we're supposed to go don't always pan out. The Quester does come to a conclusion, however. He recognizes that while he is disillusioned with he wanted to achieve, he knows that whatever God does endures forever so that all should stand in awe before him.

He also recognizes the words God gives us, the wisdom God gives us is valuable. I like the way Eugene Peterson translates it: "The words of the wise prod us to live well. They are like nails hammered home that hold life together." He may never feel like he's fully got his mind around wisdom and found the control he wanted, but he does recognize that somehow that wisdom matters and it makes life better. It holds it together.

He has this little aside where it's really good to have a friend. He has those kind of moments where he sees what wisdom does. He's just disillusioned that it has not made

him the best. It's that struggle with achievement. What kind of quest are we on? What's the purpose of life?

If the purpose of life is to make myself the best and to become a god, I'm going to be disappointed. I think that's one of the points of Ecclesiastes. The second point is that he realizes something sort of ironic. We started out in the wisdom literature with "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God." What does he say at the end? The last and final word is this: Fear God. I think we often struggle with this idea of fearing God because fear is not the relationship we think about having with God. We think about the relationship of love and how love drives out fear.

Yet, we need to have some level of respect, a real awe of who God is. For me it feels like in our society we've removed that awe, that wonder, that respect for God. It's alright if it's on a Sunday morning, and people can go and do their religious thing, but we don't think about God the rest of the time. As it says in Ecclesiastes, God made people upright, but they go off and do their own schemes. Ecclesiastes reminds me, drills down into that idea of respect for God.

I can go through life and be really disillusioned if I just follow the path that the world might show me, if I go off on my own schemes. Jesus' disciples show us the very same thing as the two disciples come and ask Jesus that question. Well they get their mother to do it—a helicopter mother before there were helicopters. She comes and asks for her sons to be on the left and the right, the most powerful places. The schemes of humans. He says, "You don't know what you're asking." He turns the tables on them and says that to be great is different. He says, "I came to serve, not to be served." He invites us to do the same.

It would be easy for me to move right into that and to talk about Galatians where it says all the law and the prophets are about loving one another. My struggle is that it's too easy to begin to talk simply about what we do and leave behind why we do it. It feels to me that so often we forget God. We leave God out. God is not part of our equations.

So as we conclude with our pass through the wisdom literature, I'm reminded again that the Alpha and the Omega of wisdom is the fear of God—that respect, that wonder, that awe of God that seems so absent in most of my life yet feels like the very thing that should be directing and guiding, calling.

Very few people can go to the top of a mountain and look out without some awe at the wonder of what is so much greater. Let's not forget when we look out at God, it's like looking out from that mountain in wonder and awe at the One who offers us the words of wisdom that would help us hold our lives together. Otherwise, all is vanity. Amen.