

Season after Pentecost
Old Testament Wisdom and Poetry: Ecclesiastes

July 25/26, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 12: 22-23; Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11; 3: 1-17

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In the Old Testament wisdom literature, Proverbs has a fairly optimistic view of what can be known about wisdom and the positive results of living a wise life.¹ It represents the eager, go-getter, the Linus who keeps coming to the pumpkin patch each Halloween convinced his overnight vigil will be rewarded by a visit from the Great Pumpkin. Ecclesiastes and Job, on the other hand, represent more of a feel of a Charlie Brown after Lucy has snatch that football away one too many times². Most of us only know Ecclesiastes from the Pete Seeger song, “Turn, Turn, Turn” made famous by the Byrds in the 1960s. As pleasant a song as those verses in chapter 3 inspired, the rest of Ecclesiastes is not for the faint-hearted or depressed. It’s really a wonder that Ecclesiastes made in into the Bible. Dr. Frances Gench speaks of these uncomfortable portions of the Bible as being like the disturbing, creepy uncle that you’d like to avoid at the family reunion. But since he IS part of the family, the sibling of one of your parents, you have no choice but to acknowledge him and engage in at least, some kind of polite conversation.

In Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth in Hebrew) we are conversing with “the Teacher.” The Teacher appears to be a wise, old person or king who has looked back over his life’s pursuit of wisdom and the meaning of life. He is brutally honest, a bit cynical and somewhat disappointed about his conclusions. “All is vanities,” he says. Or better translated, all is “vapor” or “smoke”. What the Teacher wants his students to know is that there are limits to what even the smartest, most diligent or faithful can know or achieve. Ouch, we don’t like being told we “can’t” do something. We moderns like to imagine that science or technology can eventually explain, fix or control anything. The Teacher asks what good is prestige, money, power or material stockpiles when you’re going to die and you can’t take it with you? See what I mean? Who let this Teacher in the Bible? He sounds a bit like Winnie the Pooh’s friend, Eyore, as we observes: The sun goes up and sets; You plant, reap and plant again; You get up, go to work, go to bed, leading to the unspoken “What’s the purpose of it all?” What are we to get about faith and life from this guy?

We have to admit that Ecclesiastes does model honesty in conversation rather than pious, polite, superficial church-talk that never speaks to the hard stuff. His language is a bit stark and dark, but he’s real. He’s obviously frustrated and he has good reason. In

chapter 9 he bemoans, that the race is not always won by the swift nor the battle by the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor favor to the skillful, “but time and chance happen to them all.” (9:11) It rains on the just and the unjust. Or as we might say today, he’s concluded that “life’s not fair.” Who hasn’t complained about that? If that wasn’t disappointing enough, it seems he is “one who has tried and tried again to legitimize his life through reason”³ or position or riches and in the end discovered it didn’t work. Is he totally off? Does the concentration of life on such worldly goals bring us lasting peace or a craving for yet more or something else? We might want to cut off our conversation with this creepy, uncle Teacher before we get any more depressed. But if we do, we’d miss the good news woven into his tirades and poetry.

In those famous poetic lines of Ecclesiastes about the seasons and times of life, the Teacher “lists experiences of human life without judgement, prescription or predestination. Creation is not random chaos. God’s creation has order. The Teacher [then] says that God has put a sense of the past and future into the hearts of humans, yet our ability to reflect on the past and future can not lead us to know God’s plan fully. The best that we can do is not forget and live God’s will and love right where we are,”⁴ right now. “Ultimately, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes has a radical trust and faith in God.”⁵ “Eat, drink and take pleasure in your toil” (3:13) is not a fatalistic surrender to senselessness but a call to live fully in God’s gifts each moment. Don’t wait for the next promotion, next soccer victory or “A”, newest I phone, car or ideal mate. Instead, humbly accept that we can’t fully understand the vastness of God and God’s ways and take delight in the love and gifts of God each day. This is not the advise of one who has lost faith but one who has found that putting your faith in anything but the goodness and love of God is vanities, smoke, vapor.

We just finished another week of Vacation Bible School. It is a lot of hard work. The temperatures on Monday and Tuesday were brutal. The children come with unique personalities, great energy and the universal tendency to push boundaries. Each night, every adult and teen helper left exhausted. After a few more hours of clean up, you’d never know there had been a Vacation Bible School here. So is it vanities, vapor, smoke, meaningless? The Teacher of Ecclesiastes would probably ask a different questions? Was VBS about our reputation, letting Haven feel good about itself or about living in God’s will? Each night, was our toil a drudge or gladly doing God’s ministry? “It is God’s gift that all should eat, drink, and take pleasure in all their toil.” VBS was not vanities. We welcomed back children and excitedly welcomed new children. We sang, danced, played, talked, listened, praised and prayed together. We knew each night, each station session, each song, interaction or exchange was an opportunity to share God’s grace and good news

and we wouldn't squander it. Though you may not be able to measure the results of VBS any better than you could hold on to vapor or smoke, it was not waste or meaninglessness. God was there and we stood in God's will and we delighted in gifts of the children, their families and the gospel we could share. We trusted in God and God's power to provide.... comfort... heal... forgive... and love us forever and experienced it to be true. The decorations may be down, supplies are gathered to get stored and items being readied to be returned but the efforts for VBS were not wasted --the blessings of VBS go on.

Ecclesiastes may be the strange, creepy, cranky uncle of the Bible but he's not all bad. He's got a few important things right. Don't waste precious life chasing after false gods that will leave you unsatisfied. There's a time to be angry about unfair injustices and a time to realize we have to trust God whenever we can not find fairness, rhyme nor reason in circumstances. Don't wait ----- Each day, live in gratitude for the many, daily gifts of God and wherever you toil, give it as a gift to God, who invites us to share in our Lord's efforts to save, redeem and love all of creation. Yeah, Ecclesiastes may still be a bit creepy but he's an effective cranky Bible Uncle. He's so blunt and abrasive about the ways of living that are vanities, smoke, vapor it inspires you to find another way to t live, God's way, that is not always easy but it's worthwhile and life-giving. "Vapor or meaning? Choose, for God's sake," Ecclesiastes snarls at us before he wanders off to eat, drink and merrily toil. Amen

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

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1. Rolf Jacobson, 2013 commentary on Wisdom Literature: Week 5 Ecclesiastes 1: 1-18
 2. Rolf Jacobson, 2013 commentary on Wisdom Literature: Week 5 Ecclesiastes 1: 1-18
 3. Shauna Hannan, "Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2: 18-23" posted on workingpreacher.org
 4. Sandy Scott, "Memorial Sunday: Why Remember!" posted on goodpreacher.com
 5. Sandy Scott, "Memorial Sunday: Why Remember!" posted on goodpreacher.com