

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 25, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:18-26 “Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. **19** And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. **20** So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. **21** For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. **22** What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? **23** All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

24 A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, **25** for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

26 To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

“Jesus in the Middle of a Meaningful Life”

In a surprise announcement, Kim Kardashian announced she was quitting social media for good. This was not a publicity stunt. It wasn't the result of a spat with another celebrity. She wasn't fed up with all the hate and criticism filling up her comments. In a final post to her 100,000,000 plus fans, she explained that what he has been promoting was a lie. Kim revealed that she is leaving behind the pursuit of physical beauty, high fashion, luxury goods, exotic locations, elite pampering and the inspirational advice she uses to fill her social media persona. None of it matters. None of it satisfies. None of those things that she has been filling her life with have given her any real meaning.

Shocking, or at least it would be, if it was actually true. But that would be shocking on the same level as the words we hear today in the Book of Ecclesiastes. King Solomon would have dominated social media, tabloid news, People's Most Beautiful Man, and Forbes richest people in the world. He had everything. And yet this was his conclusion about it all: **“Meaningless! Meaningless!...Utterly meaningless!”** (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

It sounds depressing. But it's actually good news for people who follow Solomon's wisdom in the pages of Scripture. Solomon has learned from his own experiences of wasting his life. Now he wants to share that bitterly-earned wisdom with others. He wants to spare us from the mistakes he has made. He wants anyone who is paying attention to know that earthly pursuits won't provide ultimate satisfaction for life. For people today who are searching,

looking, following; doing everything in their power to insert meaning into their lives, Solomon wants us to find a real, meaningful life. But it means seeing Jesus at the heart of it all.

Sitcoms have cute catchphrases that always get laughter. Solomon has a catchphrase that sucks the air out of a room. Some translations use “Vanity of vanities...” (ESV, NKJV). The one we usually print in our bulletin has “Meaningless!” (NIV) Another accurate version uses “Absolute futility.” (CSB) It’s a little tough to nail down what Solomon is saying in good English. The word he uses literally means “breath” or “vapor.” But that can mean different things in different contexts. Think of it like a building project. You set up beautiful patio furniture in your back yard and a storm comes along and blows it all into your neighbor’s back yard. You wash, wax, and polish your truck, but that same evening a storm comes along and coats it in dust and dirt. In a different context “breath” or “vapor” can refer to the futility of your efforts. You give some heartfelt advice to your teenager, only to earbuds in her ears when she turns her head. You offer an emotional, lengthy explanation why you were in such a hurry and the police officer doesn’t even twitch his mustache.

Pat O’Brien was a sportscaster and host of entertainment talk shows. He was well-liked and respected. He rubbed shoulders with the biggest celebrities. He should have been happy. But his unhappiness led him to drink. Finally, he hit rock bottom when he finished off 14 bottles of wine in one day.¹ In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, he described those internal struggles came from always needing to be loved and adored by strangers. Famous people always need more. The way he sees things, most celebrities aren’t happy. They have what they thought they wanted, what they sacrificed and worked so hard to get. But they are miserable.

Oscar Wilde, a British author from about a hundred years ago said: “There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.” In chapter two of Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us working hard, saving and sacrificing to achieve and accumulate is a terrible tragedy. It’s a tragedy when getting the things you want don’t actually give you the happiness you are after.

Martin Luther, commenting on this book of the Bible, diagnosed the problem. It’s not really the things that’s the problem, he said. The real root is the condition of the heart that is disordered. It’s really a form of idolatry, to fear, love or trust in anything or anyone more than God. Pastor Tim Keller expands on that, saying the problem is building your life around something that can’t deliver ultimate joy.

Maybe your whole life you’ve been longing to find romantic love, share you life with a special person. Maybe you’ve been wanting to start a family more than anything else. Maybe you’ve been zeroed in with laser-like focus on money and wealth and everything that comes with it. It could be success. It could be power and glory. It’s what pops into your head in moments of quiet, the thing you can’t keep your heart from looking for. Now, none of those

¹ Lisa Capretto. Pat O’Brien Explains Why So Many Celebrities Aren’t Truly Happy. Huffpost, 10 December 2017. Accessed on 23 August 2019 at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pat-obrien-celebrities-happy_n_5717815

things are bad or sinful in themselves. And it's good to have drive and ambition in life. But think about one of those that rises to the top. Could you be happy without it? It's the difference between sorrow and despair. We feel sorrow over losing anything that's good, that makes life better. But despair sets in when we lose an ultimate thing. We despair when we can't find any meaning or hope for life when it's gone. Without it, we have no alternate source to turn to.

Solomon goes through a lengthy list of culprits that had taken on inappropriate importance in his life. In this section, he tells us how working hard to get stuff led to despair: **"I hated all the things I had told for under the sun."** (Ecclesiastes 2:18) He continues: **"So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun."** (Ecclesiastes 2:20)

The point Solomon is trying to get across to us is that we might not set up little shrines to our idols in our homes. But we can easily slip into the subtle idolatry of giving too much value to our hearts's desires in our every day existence. We live our lives in a practical sense as if this life under the sun is all there really is to life.

It's easy to see through the game of Monopoly. We know we aren't going to become vicious tycoons in real life after we try to build hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place to bankrupt all the other players in the game. I have a friend who doesn't want his children to play the Game of Life. Even accumulating a car full of kids, a nice life insurance policy and lots of cash isn't really the way to win in real life. But so often we act as if it is. We've pushed people and pursuits to the heart of our own personal board game. Take any of those subtle idolatry examples. Finding love or starting a family can be good. But when we push them to the middle of life, we put so much pressure on those people, they can never really live up to our expectations. They will always disappoint. Worse yet, all our efforts cause us to miss out on the real meaningful life.

You have to read all the way to the end of the Book of Ecclesiastes to come up with Solomon's solution to despair. In all the other chapters, he goes through all the other things he used to try to fill that God-sized hole in his life. But scattered throughout, we get hints and clues at the ultimate meaning Solomon found for life. Like here, in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 he says: **"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God."** (Ecclesiastes 2:24) When he started to see the hand of God at work in his life, it led to an understanding of the ultimate meaning for life.

We can't get to **"fear God"** as Solomon concludes in Ecclesiastes 12:13 without understanding why. Seeing Jesus at the heart of Scripture is the key to understanding all of the Bible. Seeing Jesus in the middle of our lives is the only way to find ultimate meaning for our lives.

Jesus understood the meaning of his life. He lived his entire life for you. He gave up pleasure and sacrificed security to live the life of perfect obedience in your place. Instead of living his life to avoid death, Jesus lived with suffering and death in his sights throughout his life. Through the cross and resurrection Jesus saw the goal of giving you a new life. And it's

important to keep in mind that Jesus didn't just live with purpose to show us how to live for others or make sacrifices for for greater purposes. The purpose of everything Jesus did was to rescue fallen sinners from a meaningless destination after life. So Jesus worked and toiled harder than Solomon. Jesus poured out great effort for the those who obey their absolute best for God and those who barely make any effort. Jesus carried out his mission with wisdom, knowledge and skill for people who so often get it wrong in their own lives. Jesus did everything necessary in his life for people who will never achieve perfection in theirs. So now by faith you are gifted with all the results of the meaningful life of Jesus.

It might seem like a subtle shift. Instead of seeing Jesus as one thing among all the others that gives meaning to life, to move Jesus to the heart of our very existence. But that subtle shift in perspective makes the most significant impact on life. Life is a gift. Everything we get from God is a gift. Everything we have in life is ours to use faithfully and freely for God's ultimate purposes.

When you and I live the meaningful life given to us by god, it gives an opening to show how Jesus gives meaning to life. Here's what I mean. There are plenty of people in your life who live without purpose. They don't know God. So they can't possibly appreciate God's purpose for their lives. Some numb their pain with alcohol. Some drift through life without hope. Some give into the most dangerous kinds of despair. But those are all just symptoms. At their roots is the same idolatry that causes high achievers to keep striving, searching ceaseless, torturing themselves into improvement. What they are all missing is Jesus in the middle of a meaningful life.

Recognize the idols you struggle with in your life. Drown them daily in repentance and bask in the realization of how much better and more beautiful and more glorious Jesus is to you than any idol.

Life with Jesus isn't a breath or vapor. It has lasting implications. A meaningful life with Jesus makes eternal differences. That's why it doesn't matter if you are missionary who travels to a distant country and is martyred for the faith or a grandmother who stays home to take care of a special needs child. You are pouring into another human being that same ultimate meaning you have been given by Jesus Christ. When everything in life is a gift instead of an idol, it can be used joyfully to give thanks to God. The goals you achieve, the love you find, the money you get, the success that comes your way, even pain and suffering can be a gift when they bring your heart closer to Jesus. They might not earn you followers or influence or comments by millions on social media. But Jesus gives infinitely better, eternal riches of his love, his presence, and his forgiveness. And when you have Jesus at the middle of your meaningful life, you have everything. Amen.