

Ecclesiastes Summer Series-

July 12th, 2020, “Nothing New Under the Sun!”

Pastor John Reutter-Harrah

What would you say is the meaning of life? Joseph Campbell said, “The meaning of life is whatever you ascribe it to be. Being alive is the meaning.”

The Dalai Lama said- “Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can’t help them, at least don’t hurt them.”

And how about Kermit the Frog, Jim Henson- “Life is meant to be fun and joyous and fulfilling. May each of yours be that.”

If I said to you, what makes life worth living; I wonder how you would answer. Taking care of your family? Being passionate about your work? We people of faith might say, Knowing that God created us and that we’ve got a job to do in this world. What makes life worth living?

We’re beginning a nine-week study of the Book of Ecclesiastes this morning. Ecclesiastes is the pen-name of the writer this book. It means something like The Teacher. Luther translated it as The Preacher, but the book is not filled with sermons; it’s really more philosophical wonderings.

The book was attributed to King Solomon, but the language and style is from many centuries later than Solomon, so it probably came from a writer who claimed that King Solomon as a way to say, Even a king like Solomon would struggle with the meaning of life, Solomon who seemed to have everything.

In June, I was praying about a sermon series especially for this time of the pandemic, and now with the reckoning of our racial history, and felt led to a study of Ecclesiastes. The book asks, What’s life all about? What gives life meaning? And I’m praying we’ll have some insights for how to live life in these challenging days of the year 2020.

Maybe when you heard the reading earlier, you thought, This is pretty bleak stuff. The writer is really struggling to find meaning. I have paired these readings with some words of Jesus, so that we get a different perspective, a different outlook.

The book starts off this way- “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” The Hebrew word hebel, translated vanity here literally means breath or vapor. Everything is like a breath- everything is a vapor! He uses it metaphorically, to mean things that are insubstantial, or futile, or meaningless. What a start, huh? Everything is meaningless, or transitory, everything is futile. Wow! And then he says, What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth stays the same. I read this and was reminded of spring of 2017, when my sister in law Isi was diagnosed with cancer at 56 years of age. Our daughter was eight months pregnant at the time, and my sister in law Isi died within a week of our first grandchild being born. I remember our daughter saying, I didn’t want to just replace someone in our family; we want Isi here! The Teacher says, A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth doesn’t seem to change much.

The sun rises and sets, and it’ll do the same thing the next day. Round and round goes the wind, the wind comes back again on its circuits. The streams run to the sea, but the sea isn’t full, because the writer has some basic understanding of evaporation-clouds, rain, streams overflowing, out to the sea and back again. But it just seems to be a circle.

All things are wearisome, the writer says, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. Somebody in our Bible study said, apparently the writer never owned a smartphone. “Nothing new under the sun, huh!”

I want to leap in here and rescue this guy- Hey, life isn’t so bad! Get a grip! Take a look around with some new eyes! But before I do that, I want to honor where he’s at. Have you ever felt something like this? The life you planned didn’t turn out... You were stuck in a dead end job and it seemed like nothing ever changed... You were burned out... Maybe you suffer from depression, and there are bleak times in your life when life just seems wearisome. You were in a relationship that was not healthy, but day after day you stayed. The sun rose and the sun set, and there you still were.

I heard at one point that 80% of American workers are unhappy at their job. The more automated our work gets, the more that figure may rise. The writer says, All things are wearisome. What do we do when life seems that way? Ecclesiastes will offer various suggestions for finding meaning in this life, and we'll get to those as this series moves on.

But for today I want to look at this opening salvo about the meaningless of life, and maybe see things in a different way. The writer looks around at the natural life cycle of things and sees weariness. I wonder if sometimes two people look at the same thing, and see things differently. I'm using sight here as if everybody can see. What if you're visually impaired? Two people can be in the same setting, and one is looking at the scene and one is hearing what's going on. And they will tell a different story.

Ecclesiastes looks at the sun rising and the sun setting, day after day, and sees monotony. Jesus, in the reading today from Matthew, says to a crowd on a sunny day- It's easy to love your friends, and it's easy to hate certain people in your life. But I say to you, Love your enemies; wish them well! Pray for people who hassle you. Jesus says, I want you to be like God. Because do you know how God operates? God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, day after day. God throws us this gift of a star that warms our planet and makes things grow, day after day. Depending on how we look at it, that's not so wearisome.

Ecclesiastes says, the streams run to the sea, but the sea isn't full. Evaporation, rainfall, full streams, into the ocean, and on and on. Jesus sees it this way- maybe he is sitting by a rolling brook that is carrying water out to the Sea of Galilee, and he's watching a storm cloud gather on the other side of the lake—Jesus says, I want you to be like God and love your enemies, because God makes the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. God is a gracious and merciful God who knows everybody needs rain, even our enemies. And Jesus, pointing to the brook and the sea and the clouds, says, That's the way God wants you to be, like the cycles of nature.

How are we going to look at things? Wearisome? Same old same old? Or what an incredible world God has set us in. We have a parking lot at our church with 70 foot tall Douglas fir trees and a bountiful garden and life all around us. And I don't

know where you are worshiping this morning, but life is all around you! What will we choose to focus on? Nature is the first Bible. Nature for billions of years has given glory to God. Nature is the first incarnation, God in the flesh of creation. Will we choose to be in the moment, to take in the presence of God all around us, or is this just another day?

Ecclesiastes says, The wind blows to the south and goes to the north, it keeps riding around on its circuits, and then it returns. Do you remember when Jesus talks about the wind? Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and Jesus says, You need the Spirit to come alive in you. And then he says, The Spirit is like the wind. He doesn't say- You know that wind; it's always blowing in the same direction; south, north, comes back again on the same currents- No, Jesus says, the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going. The Spirit is going to move through you- this doesn't sound wearisome, it sounds adventuresome.

Ecclesiastes says, Nobody will remember me when I'm gone! That's one way some people find meaning, through the impact they leave behind. We don't want to be forgotten. He says, The people of long ago are not remembered, and generations in the future will all be forgotten by people after them. Tony Campolo once said, At some point people will be eating potato salad at your funeral, and the question is, What will they be saying about you? What will they remember about you? What meaning will they attach to your life?

When somebody says to Jesus, How do you live a good life? he says, Love the Lord your God with everything you have, and then love your neighbor as you love yourself. Jesus says, Let that be your goal when you get out of bed in the morning- love God and love your neighbor- and what people do or do not remember about us is out of our hands.

How do we love our neighbor of color who is suffering racism? We can love through changes in policy and budgets. How do we love that person who disagrees with us politically? Jesus does not mean sentimental feelings towards somebody. Jesus means acting to secure God's best for our neighbor. It seems to me that I as recount the events of the day as I go to sleep at night, if I can think of an instance

where I loved my neighbor, that is not a wearisome day. And if I cannot think of an instance, the sun will come up again tomorrow, and I can go at it again.

There is an old Jewish folktale about a poor man who grew weary of the corruption and hatred that he saw every day. He was tired of the constant injustice that his people experienced, and the loneliness of his isolated living. His family and friends listened as he spoke passionately of his desire for a city where justice was honored and where personal wholeness could be found. Night after night he dreamed of a city where heaven touched earth.

One day he announced that he could wait no longer. He packed a meager meal, kissed his wife and children, and set out in search of the city of his dreams. He walked all day and just before sunset, he found a place to sleep just off the road in a forest. He ate his sandwich, said his prayers and smoothed the earth where he would lie. Just before he went to sleep, he placed his shoes in the center of the path, pointing in the direction he would continue the next day.

That night a sly fellow was walking the same path and discovered the traveler's shoes. Unable to resist a practical joke, he turned the shoes around, pointing them in the direction from which the man had come.

Early the next morning the traveler arose, said his prayers, ate what remained of the food he had brought, and started his journey by walking in the direction his shoes pointed. He walked all day long, and just before sunset he saw the heavenly city off in the distance. It wasn't as large as he had expected, and it looked strangely familiar. He entered a street that looked much like his own, knocked on a familiar door, greeted the family—who turned out to be his family—and lived happily ever after in the heavenly city of his dreams.

What do we see when we look about us? Where will we find meaning? Somewhere else? Or in the very place God has placed us with fresh eyes to see and ears to hear. The sun rises and sets, it's just another day? Or is this day full of opportunities to love God and love our neighbor? We'll continue with Ecclesiastes next week, with the sermon, "What's So Great about Wisdom?" Amen.