

“Hear this, both rich and poor together,
there is no price one can give to God for life.”

AMEN!

It is early in the morning and a farmer wakes
to tend to the cows and get started
on daily chores.

A nurse checks a few patient charts before
the morning shift arrives, one in particular
she pauses to hold the patient’s hand,
knowing it is likely they’ll die
before her next shift.

The store clerk pulls into an empty parking lot
to unlock the food market.

An emergency alarm sounds and
firefighters, paramedics and police spring
into rescue mode.

While daycare workers, greet their
6 am parents dropping off tired children
still sleeping or quietly crying since
parent needs to leave them there and
get to work.

Teachers load work into their car

and head to the classroom to prepare
students for life.

Streets fill with cars, people fill into buses
and commuter trains as workers and students
get to places they need to be.

Road workers head out to repair bridges and potholes
and keep infrastructure safe while in
a neighborhood people exit their homes
to exercise by walking or jogging.

Tourists pack to go to beach, mountain, and
historical sites hoping to see all they can
during their short vacation and still get
the much needed rest and relaxation. (Pause)

“What do people gain from all the toil at
which they toil under the sun?

A generation goes, a generation comes.

We are busy with unhappy busy-ness that God
has made us busy with.

It's all a chasing of wind, a striving to grasp
at vapor that vanishes.

This also is vanity.”

The haunting words of the teacher from Ecclesiastes.

The writer/preacher is a keen observer of
the human condition, with reflections that
concern our struggle to find meaning in
the daily life that reverberates across
ages and souls... from
generation to generation.

One might be tempted to languish
in its appearance of depression, insignificance, or
just take a gloomy outlook when reflecting
on the wisdom from Ecclesiastes,

but that would be a shame to get stuck there because
the text offers insight for its readers to gather
into the space of the universe God
created and consider a mortals place in it.

(Pause)

First some history about Ecclesiastes...

Scholars place the book to have likely been
written between 450 and 350 b.c.e.

Author and rector Denise Yarborough wrote that
“the economy of the day was a mercantile system,

that is, one that is money based and money driven.

The people worked hard in urban settings.

For the first time in Israelite history,
average people were in debt.”

Loans were made for good ideas and some people
got rich while others fell into financial collapse.

Was it good luck or bad luck?

Was success a product of hard workers and
failure the result from lazy people?

Was it a matter of those with or
those without connections?

The questions and the similarities to
that world and ours
are not hard to miss.

We are constantly told that there's
equal opportunity to anyone to
be rich and happy, just dream big,
work hard and to take risks to
get the reward. (Pause)

Whose mailbox is full of credit card ads,

debt consolidation loans, and
home improvement loan ads?

We get catalogues that offer the purchase of
any item under the sun can be ours and
potentially make us happy, finally...
happy, if we just buy it.

Yet, we know that promised happiness is fleeting...

Vanity.

The quest for financial security and
for happiness is all so very exhausting.

Those who live on fixed income wonder
how they'll be able to keep up with inflation?

Single and married parents worry how
they'll pay for skyrocketing college expenses?

Graduating students wonder how they'll pay back
the financial aid they must acquire
to get a degree?

It's harder and harder to buy a first home,
take a vacation, or even put food on
the table these days.

We, also face the question of the
teacher in Ecclesiastes... “What’s it all for?”

Why am I even trying to do all this anyway?”

The answer is in there but it’s not included
in the assigned text.

The reading stops at the gloomy questions without
the gift of an answer.

But the answer comes when the teacher says:
There is nothing better for humans than to eat,
to drink, and to find enjoyment in their toil.

In other words, there’s nothing better
than keeping it simple.

With words of comfort the teacher goes on to say,
how these simple, but not average things,
please God and from this,
God gives wisdom and knowledge
and, yes, joy.

A Buddhist would explain it as mindfulness.

“A state of awareness and appreciation
for the present moment.”

The here, the now, the breath...

The teacher in Ecclesiastes calls us to live life
in the moment, for the moment.

To take time to gain perspective on
the work we do and notice
the activity of our daily lives;

to practice stepping back from them
to see the bigger picture and recall the
activity of God in what we do,
what we say, and how we think.

And to know that God is in control and
that the quality of love that pours from God
leads us to enjoy each moment as it comes.

The author's continued usage of "All is vanity,"
is not voicing despair so much as being
realistic and accepting in the realities of
our place and our order.

And just as we think deeply about this truth,
or even consider the notion that we somehow
"get it," the writer then says wait!

That, too, is a chasing after vanity,
hunting a vapor, or trying to capture a breath...

because even in our greatest
knowledge or wisdom or joy we will
still not fully know everything God
has done from beginning to end.

We are finite, we can only endure so much,
but God endures forever.

Nothing can be taken from God
nor added to God.

And since God endures forever,
then somehow so will we.

“Eat, drink, and take pleasure in all their toil.
It will bring about wisdom, knowledge and joy.”

These are things that anyone can acquire. (Pause)

Have you noticed the last few Sunday’s
while in Luke’s gospel we have been
walking through instances of distraction?

“Martha, Martha. Why are you so distracted?”

Then last week, the distracted disciples
need Jesus to teach
them how to pray.

Now today, the rich man is distracted by
his wealth and possessions.

Luke leans in gently to whisper in our ear,
to recognize how we too can be distracted
by good things, we can also
be taught to let go.

What would it mean for us to
say “no” and let go the distractions?

Even the good ones?

Martha’s work and service of hospitality was good,
but she was distracted from letting herself
be near Jesus... let go, Martha.

Prayer is good, but the disciples were
distracted from intimate conversation
with Jesus and desired a formulaic prayer...

Let go, followers of Jesus.

Now today, wealth and possessions,
are not in themselves evil,
but they become powerful agents
that distract us from God... let go...

They bolster the worst parts of humans

when we seek them for our own use,
our own power, fooling ourselves to believe
we are the controllers... let go...

(Pause)

As another day passes and people return
to their homes for dinner,
tend to self and family, watch television,
do some reading, and finally come to
rest and sleep to begin it all again...

We, in the presence of one another and with God,
take time to hear these words of wisdom:

Eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our toil.

AMEN!