

Sunday January 3rd, 2021

Ecclesiastes 1

Series: "What If?"

Sermon: "A Book About Nothing."

There is the story of two brothers; twins actually. Just for fun let's call them Mike and Mark. And these brothers were identical twins. They looked a great deal alike: same hair colour, same eye colour, they even had the same height. However, beyond the physical, these two brothers were nothing alike. One brother was what we would call an optimist. He saw the positive in everything and was always smiling. The other brother was a pessimist, who saw the negative in everything, and was always frowning.

The boys' parents could not get over how identical twins, raised in the same home, eating the same food, going to the same school and attending the same events, could be so different. As the boys' tenth birthday approached, the boys' father (AKA Snoop Dad) decided to do a little experiment to see how deep their pessimism, or as the case may be, their optimism went. On the day of their birthday, the boys returned from school and headed to their rooms.

The father had placed in the pessimist's room, all manner of the newest toys. Toys any child would love to get. The boy examined his gifts with little enthusiasm and then with a grim expression said, "I guess they are nice, but I'll only break them, and they need so many batteries." In the optimist's room, the father placed a bag of manure and a bale of hay. That boy began jumping up and down and shouting with glee. The father asked, "Why are you so happy?" The boy replied, "Well this manure and hay must mean there is a pony somewhere around here."

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Maybe you think you sort of float between the two perspectives. However, if you say you are a realist, I bet my bottom dollar you are really a pessimist. Being a pessimist, or an optimist, is really all about how a person sees and experiences life. It is about what kind of glasses we put on to understand our situation and reality. Today marks the beginning of our new sermon series, and we are taking on one of the most challenging books of the bible.

The book of Ecclesiastes is an odd inclusion in the scriptures. In fact, it almost did not get included in the bible. There was a fierce debate over whether something so depressing, and so skeptical, should be in the bible. Eventually, it was the attribution of the book to King Solomon that won its inclusion. One commentator wrote that Ecclesiastes "is like an apple tree standing in an orange grove". It is an odd piece, and it stands out as different, and perhaps that is why so many people avoid it all together, with the exception of a few famous verses.

However, Ecclesiastes is one of the most quoted bible books in western literature, and allusions to it in literature are also abundant. So, let's begin with what might be the drier bits of our exploration, and that is some background. The book of Ecclesiastes was likely written in the 3rd century BC. It is attributed to Solomon, because the author refers to himself as the "Son of David". However, that is a title used by all descendants of David, including Jesus.

Solomon may have provided some of the material included in this book, but it was likely edited and put in its final form under King Hezekiah.

Sunday January 3rd, 2021

The name Ecclesiastes is a rough translation of a Hebrew word meaning “gatherer”; which is traditionally translated as teacher or preacher. Ecclesiastes is part of the bible called the writings or wisdom literature. This also includes the books of Job, Proverbs, and Psalms. There are also some books from the same time period not in the bible, which are similar, like the “Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach”. The kind of writing called wisdom literature was very popular in this time period. Many cultures surrounding Israel have similar types of literature, such as the Greeks and their great love of philosophy. Philosophy means, after all, love of wisdom.

What is really interesting in Israel’s case is that we have two distinct groups of learned people writing and teaching, at the same time. The prophets we are well acquainted with, but also at the same time there were groups of learned men or sages, who worked and served in the king’s court. They were entrusted with the education of the royal house and the nobility. It is quite probable that Solomon, had such an education, as did the kings that followed.

Like all wisdom literature and philosophy, Ecclesiastes was written, and preserved, to elicit discussion, and to keep people from accepting and relying on easy answers to complex questions. Ecclesiastes asks at least four critical questions that all of us must confront. 1) Where can I find satisfaction. 2) Who is really in control? 3) What does it take to be in control? 4) How do we live wisely? Sounds like a Rolling Stones song, doesn’t it?

The biggest issue we will face in delving into Ecclesiastes is that we will wrestle with whether the book is life affirming, or irredeemably pessimistic. But remember, this book was written to provoke discussion and reflection. It was designed to push us out of our comfort zone. Ecclesiastes may also be one of the most important books for a modern person to read and study. As our world moves more and more to secularism, the writer of Ecclesiastes seeks to point out the absolute futility of a life lived without God.

In other words; without God, what is the point of life. There is also throughout our journey a risk that we will assume the writer is using hyperbole or exaggeration to make his point, but I don’t think so. I think we would like to explain away his words, rather than face the painful truth of them. So, shall we pick an apple from this tree growing in the orange grove, and see where it takes us? The very first phrase of verse two is enough to knock us back on our heels.

“Everything is meaningless, utterly meaningless.” Some versions use the word vanity here. Let those words sink in. They are a real downer! Why would the writer pen such negativity? Was he off his meds? However, could it be that he is right? At least from a certain perspective. Stop for a moment and consider those elements of your life that you think give you meaning. Those things that give you purpose, and a reason to get up in the morning.

Remember that the writer is trying to get you to think deeper; to consider things in a way you’ve never thought about them before. Jesus said, “Where your heart is there your treasure will be.” What we value most is where we spend our time and treasure? Maybe the writer is being a wet blanket on our lives, because we need someone to be. So, pause and just focus on what it is right now in your life that captures your focus and interest.

Sunday January 3rd, 2021

Do you remember a few years ago, one of the hottest items grabbing attention was a virtual reality game called Pokémon Go? If you do not know what this game is, you must have been keeping yourself in an isolation room. Thousands of people of all ages, were trapesing around our town and towns and cities around the world, trying to catch virtual computer-generated creatures. Not everyone was happy with this endeavor.

In late July the year it was released, someone actually took offence to this game being played in her neighbourhood, and subsequently shot BBs at people searching through a local park in Newmarket. This thing was so crazy that I met a young person that summer who told me he had been out until 5am one night, hunting for these things. Uber drivers reported people hired them to drive around cities looking for rare Pokémon. Data usage in some phone plans were skyrocketing. Not to mention people already obsessed with their phones, not watching where they are going.

Now this is just one example of something people do with their time and treasure that Ecclesiastes shines on and asks, “what’s the point?” If you think about it, it is really a meaningless exercise, although perhaps a wonderful diversion. The recent crave of the Pokémon Go game simply reveals how we are never satisfied. We are always looking for the new thing, but eventually, as we now realize, people will stop hunting the Pokémon, and move on to the next thing.

Our culture is very adept at celebrating vanity or meaninglessness. People go gaga over things that have no relevance to them personally, nor enhance their lives one bit. So, we see pictures of people sleeping outside a store for a day or two waiting for the latest iPhone, or to grab some concert tickets. Scalpers know how fanatical people get over events, so they double or triple the ticket price, but people still pay to go.

When I was a young guy growing up, my dad and I would often enjoy a football game on Sunday afternoons. For some reason he always seemed to be taken by the Dallas Cowboys and as some of you know, I was always a Pittsburg Steelers fan. In particular, dad seemed to like Tom Landry, the onetime coach of the Cowboys. The story goes that something unexpected happened to the players of the Cowboys in the days after their Super bowl win.

Landry states that there was an overwhelming sense of elation and celebration among the players right after the win, but soon, after a few days, another emotion began to emerge. There was a deep and disturbing sense of emptiness among the players who all began to ask, “There must be more.” More than winning the Super Bowl? Can anyone even tell me who the Cowboys defeated to win that year? No? Not surprising. It is all so meaningless.

So why have I seen people express more emotion over their team winning a game, than just about anything else in their lives. Ecclesiastes tells us that everything we value is an illusion, it is meaningless. Whether the Jays win today effects my life not one wit, but I still want to focus my attention there. No wonder, modern secularists are so popular. Writers like Dawkins produce drivel like “The God Delusion” and people gobble it up. I think it is because people want the secular things in their life to have meaning. Take God out of the mix and they think suddenly that earthly pursuits I attend to, make sense.

Sunday January 3rd, 2021

But do they really? It's all like chasing the wind. You think Ecclesiastes is depressing, just try finding some hope in the modern secularist's writings.

Essentially, in Dawkins work, your life comes down to "you are born, you live and then you die". Hopefully, in evolutionary terms, you reproduce. That's all she wrote. In cosmological terms we aren't even a dust speck in the vast universe. Every human being with any intelligence knows this to be true, and it is crushing to our spirits. As we go along in Ecclesiastes, we will see how futile many things are at giving meaning to life. We know this to be true, but we still illogically pursue after finite things, hoping for meaning.

In the late fourth century a man by the name of Eutopius had fallen into disgrace. As the highest-ranking official in the Byzantine Empire, he served as the closest advisor to the emperor Arcadius, then ruling in Constantinople. But Eutopius abused his imperial power and aroused the anger of the empress Eudoxia, who orchestrated a campaign against him resulting in a sentence of death.

Desperate to save his life, Eutopius slipped away from the palace and ran to Hagia Sophia where he clung to the altar and claimed sanctuary. Soon an angry mob of soldiers surrounded the great church, denouncing Eutopius, and demanding his execution. Eventually, the crowds dispersed, but the next day was Sunday, and so they returned the following morning to see whether the pastor of the church would give into their demands for the execution of Eutopius.

The pastor was John Chrysostom, the famous preacher who served as bishop of Constantinople. As he mounted the pulpit, Chrysostom could see the church crowded with worshippers and thrill seekers. They, in turn, could see Eutopius groveling at the altar. This once great man had now become a pitiable spectacle, with his teeth chattering and hopeless terror in his eyes. The sermon Chrysostom delivered that day may be the finest he ever preached.

His text was from Ecclesiastes 1:2 "Everything is meaningless (Vanity), utterly meaningless." And for his primary illustration he used the decline of Eutopius. Here was a man, Chrysostom noted, who lost everything---position, power, wealth, freedom, safety. Only days ago, he had been the second most powerful man in the world. But it was all vanity, as events have proven, for now Eutopius had become "more wretched than a chained criminal, more pitiable than a menial slave, more indigent than a beggar wasting away with hunger."

"Though I should try my very best," Chrysostom said, "I could never convey to you in words the agony he must be suffering, from hour to hour expecting to be butchered." The preacher did not stop there however. His purpose was not to condemn Eutopius but to save him and his listeners to the gospel. To that end he challenged his listeners to recognize the vanity of their own existence.

Whether rich or poor, one day they would have to leave their possessions behind. They too would face a day of judgment-the judgment of a Holy God. Their only hope then would be the hope that they should offer to Eutopius now---mercy at the table of Christ. The sermon hit the mark for as Chrysostom concluded he could see tears flowing down people's faces. Eutopius was spared-a life saved by the words of Ecclesiastes.

Sunday January 3rd, 2021

Over 1500 years later the truth still holds for all of us. In a moment's notice, so much of what we hold dear, and think gives our lives meaning, can be taken away from us or wiped out. It is all vanity, meaninglessness. Do you not want something a lot more substantial in your life? Don't you want to scream at the world, "yes there is more than just being born, living and dying." Then let me plead with you to consider that there is something, or rather someone, that can bring your life meaning, to end the seeking of vanities.

In John chapter 6, the day after Jesus fed the multitude, the crowds that followed him, began to thin out. The people had a hard time accepting what Jesus was telling them.

Particularly, Jesus foretold the power and the meaning of his death and the Lord's supper. And many, just left. As the crowd thinned, Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, "Are you going to leave too?" Simon Peter answered for the twelve, "Lord, to whom would we go? You alone have the words that give eternal life. We believe them, and we know you are the Holy One of God." (Jn. 6:65-66) The disciples recognized the answer to the meaninglessness of life.

God is bigger than our unpredictable and brief lives. That the only secure thing we can ever have in our lives is God in Christ. Christ is our rock. If we want our house to stand, it must be built on the rock; the rock of Jesus. As the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us, "You can be the wisest person on the planet, but if your wisdom does not lead you to the undeniable fact that all things rest in Jesus, then your wisdom is meaningless."

So, is Ecclesiastes a book about nothing? No not at all. It is actually a book about everything.

Theme

How to insure a happy and prosperous New Year.

Object

None needed, but you could use a calendar if you wish.

Scripture

For I resolved to know nothing...except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 1 Corinthians 2:2

At the beginning of a new year, it is traditional that we make resolutions. Resolutions are promises concerning things that we will try to accomplish in the year to come. Usually, they have to do with losing weight or something such as that. A wise man once made a list of resolutions that I want to share with you today. I believe that they are resolutions that will help to ensure that we will have a happy and prosperous New Year.

In the New Year, be sure to LIE, CHEAT, DRINK, SWEAR and STEAL more than you did last year.

LIE back and relax just a little more this new year. Let a little more life happen to you without so much worry.

CHEAT failure. Don't be afraid to try something new because you think you may fail. It is through failure that we learn the most valuable lessons.

DRINK from the fountain of knowledge. Many people around you have already been down roads you are about to travel. Learn from mistakes they have made. Take what they have learned and use it.

SWEAR to do your best. All the time, in every situation. That is all anybody will ever ask.

STEAL a little time for God. Everyday take a little more time to develop your relationship with God.

So, if you lie, cheat, drink, swear and steal just a little more in the next year, you will have a profitable and enjoyable year ahead! God bless you in the new year!

Dear Lord, help us to live this year in a way that will be pleasing to you. Amen.

Sunday January 3rd, 2021