

Grace, mercy and peace are now yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Vanity of vanities, meaningless all is meaningless. All is vanity. Can you imagine a sermon beginning with such a hopeless statement?

We have a difficult reading before us today in the church year. It isn't difficult because it is foreign to our experiences in this world. It isn't difficult because of wording or writing style. Our reading for today out of the Old Testament is difficult because it challenges us in some personal ways. Ecclesiastes is a book that chronicles the thoughts of a man by the name of the preacher. Not in the sense what we think of today, but the one who speaks publically.

This preacher never names himself, but we believe that Solomon penned this troubling and often depressing book in the twilight years of his life. Remember who Solomon was – He is the Son of David, king of Jerusalem. In his early years he was asked by God what do you desire? He did not crave wealth or power, but humbly asked God for wisdom. To rule over the people of Israel with the wisdom of God. Hearing this God gives to Him wealth, power and wisdom. This idealist situation did not last long as later in his life, his many wives lead him away from the God who gave Him everything as he turned to worship idols and the created things of this world.

After this later stage in his life, Solomon writes. Solomon writes from experience as king and ruler, as a wise man.

Solomon documents in this book his pursuits of power and pleasure and he even records his struggle with his unbelief and the utter emptiness he experienced. This isn't a cheery book by any stretch of the imagination, because it strikes us as readers and listeners in a very vulnerable

place. This book forces us to question ourselves. To question our purpose in life and the meaning that we find in life. As we approach the text for today, we must ask an important question: Is He right? Are the things he describes under the sun meaningless? The things of this earth, are they void and offer us no purpose? Are they as fleeting as breath? Is He right?

We struggle with our meaning and purpose. Ask any High Schooler what he or she wants to be when they grow up and you might get a different answer every time you ask. Figuring out who we are and what we are here to do is a question we never quite answer. Ask a 20 something year old if they have their life figured out yet. Do they get what is going on? Figuring out meaning and purpose is a never-ending struggle. Lets take it to the opposite direction, when you retire and you wake up that first morning. You don't have to be into work, and the day is yours – what is your new purpose? What meaning does life have? Solomon in Ecclesiastes challenges our answers to these questions. He drives right to the heart of the issue in our text.

Solomon begins as he writes: Vanity of Vanities! All is vanity. The things of this world are here for a moment for us to enjoy and they are ripped away in a moment. The march of time exposes us to the fact that we are powerless to find meaning in this ever changing world. What is here one second is gone the next. Under the sun, under heaven, nothing is certain. The breath in your lungs, not guaranteed. The job you identify with not here forever. The meaning you find in relationships – time brings falling away or brings death. Time robs us of finding our meaning in life in a changing world? Is it all meaningless? Is he right?

Solomon continues as he looks to his work. What meaning do we find in our labors? The preacher recalls all the labors that he has struggled to do here on earth. All of the long hours,

restless nights, pain and toil to bring about his earthly status and his things. He writes: "I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun." The hours, days and years invested to make something of oneself. The struggle to build wealth, and fortune. Under the sun, this labor is vanity. It is vanity because the one who works doesn't even receive the full benefit. The reward for the hardworking man is given to the lazy son. His reward for His labor is meaningless, his labor brought nothing and benefited someone who will not love it like he will. Solomon's heart despairs. It is empty, it is vanity. The labor is fleeting it is here one moment and gone to another the next. Is he right?

What about the pleasures that labor brings about. Comfort of a home, a family, a life of vacations, hobbies and relaxation after a hard day. Does this bring Solomon the meaning he is so desperately looking for? Solomon continues as he writes: What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. The labor itself is difficult and crushing, there is no enjoyment of the reward because of the difficult years of earning it take a toll. Work is vexing and difficult and renders the reward meaningless. The strain of labor, the restless nights and the frustration of work – what is the point? Is it empty? Is it Vanity? Is he right?

Even Jesus in our Gospel reading for today points to the vanity of the things of this world. A man has all that could be desired in this world. A full barn and household of everything that he could need to live, survive and thrive. He is set with the things that he has. Yet he has no room

for the extra crops that he takes in. So he tears it all down and builds bigger barns and fills them. His purpose is now to live off the hard earned reward. The man sits to relax and enjoy the work of his hands and he dies. What is the purpose of his possessions? What offered meaning and purpose under the sun was taken away in an instant. So is Solomon right? Is it all vanity?

I think Solomon's point really makes us uncomfortable as we think about what we find our meaning and purpose in. What gives us meaning in this 21st century world? What does our culture look to figure out purpose? Like Solomon we often look to our careers to inform our meaning and purpose. Do we find our meaning in the job that we work? We work and strive for years and years, it shapes our lives, our priorities and we are told that if we work hard, it will pay off. Yet in an instant it can all go away. You can be laid off, a company can go under, you can be hurt and unable to work. The job that shapes us can be taken from us in a second. It is fleeting, it is vanity.

Like the parable Jesus taught, we see the reward for our labors are also vanity. Like the man with the full barns, we can work to fill our bank accounts that we might eat, drink and be happy. We can also view our life through our hobbies through the leisure we can afford from our labors. We find meaning in how we spend our time away from our jobs. Yet in an instant we can lose it all. The stock market can crash, a horrible disaster can destroy our once hard earned savings, and even death can part us from the reward of our labor. There is no guarantee, it is fleeting and temporary. It too is vanity.

Finally we can see our meaning and purpose in the relationships that we build with one another. We find our purpose in being that perfect parent, the best friend or the best spouse that we can be. We invest and build time, it shapes our lives. Yet like anything under the sun it too is fleeting. Friendships fade, children move out and people change. What once offered our meaning and purpose can be ended in a difficult divorce or other great tragedy. Even our relationships are fleeting. It is vanity.

Even if we were to find great success in all that we did – do wonderful by the world's standard in our jobs, our leisure and our relationships, Solomon is right. Under the sun, time and death destroy all. It all falls to the side. Everything that we work for turns to dust. All is vanity. As Christians we often run headlong into trusting the things of this world for our meaning and purpose. We put our trust, our sense of security and even our hope for tomorrow in the things under the sun. Bank accounts, retirement plans, our friends, hobbies and anything else in this creation. We turn the things under the sun, the good things that God has created into idols and replace God with the things of this world. We reject God and turn from him by raising up these created things. When they fail us, as they always do, we face the harsh reality that life under the sun is hopeless and void. Nothing matters – We do our best to forget this, but the haunting reality sets in again. We can feel trapped in the meaninglessness of this existence. It feels as though we are trapped in the deep end of the pool, with nothing to put our feet on to catch a breath. Where can I find meaning and fulfillment and purpose that lasts. That is real.

In the midst of chaos of our existence. In the confusion of our purpose in life. In the meaninglessness of life Jesus comes to us. Not bringing with him the things of this world. The things under the sun, but rather he comes to put His Holy Name on you. Jesus reaches into the

chaos of idolatry, sin and death, the vanity of this world and pulls you to him. In the waters of baptism Jesus restores to you something that is life changing. In that baptism your sin is forgiven, you are connected to the body of Christ and a citizen of the kingdom of God. God puts his name on you, Father, Son Holy Spirit and you are his. What separates and destroys under the sun cannot separate you from the love of God. Your sins are washed from you, you are made new.

A life that is meaningless and vanity under the sun in Jesus becomes new. The hopelessness and fleeting nature of this world are destroyed. In Jesus we are given a new identity – we become Children of God. Children of God who have a purpose and meaning in the world. As Jesus draws us to Him and we are made a part of His body through our baptism, we share in the wonderful purpose of Christ. As a church gathered here and around the world we are called to be faithful. To faithfully love God and to love our neighbor. From this purpose we orient our entire lives. As Christians we seek God out where he promises to be – in the Lords Supper and in the reading and hearing of His word and in this community as we gather here today. We are also called to put our neighbors need above our own. To love a world that is lost without a purpose. To care for our neighbor and do all that we can to love and support them. We do this in our homes, at our jobs and in our relationships. Our purpose speaks to how we are to live and love – As Christ.

When we fail and turn back to the vanity of this world – Jesus calls us back. He reaches into our vanity and the meaninglessness of the things under the sun and forgives and renews us and draws us back to him. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Let us continue in the great hope and purpose for our lives. Amen.