

4-6-25 Sermon: “And Now for Something Completely Different” – Ecclesiastes 1:1-18 & 9:7-10

There is a recurring sketch on Saturday Night Live portraying three friends being interviewed by NASA because they have survived an alien abduction.

The scientists ask questions: “How did you get into the spaceship? What did the aliens look like? How did they speak to you?” And the first two friends give similar responses: “Oh, we were surrounded by a warm light and gently lifted up into the air... The aliens looked like love and peace and all my best childhood memories... Their voices were musical, like the voice of God,” etc, etc, etc.

Then the scientists turn to the third friend – played by Kate McKinnon – a woman called Ms. Rafferty. She’s sitting there, smoking a cigarette, pants up to here, wearing a shirt that looks like the 70s had a bad night, and the scientists ask her if she had a similar experience to her friends.

Her iconic response, every time, is, “Well. Things went a little differently for me.” And, in contrast to her friends’ blissful, esoteric experiences, she tells stories about creepy gray aliens leading her into all sorts of outlandish PG-13 scenarios, in which she always manages to lose track of her pants. Hilarity ensues, as it always does on SNL.

I describe this sketch for you, because it’s kind of how I see the book of Ecclesiastes. We’ve been working our way through the wisdom literature – Proverbs, Psalms, Song of Songs – extolling the goodness of God, the virtue of wisdom, the joy of a righteous life... And then we get to Ecclesiastes. “Well,” he says. “Things turned out a little differently for me.”

It’s funny that Ecclesiastes is included in the wisdom literature because it’s really kind of *anti*-wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes takes everything that we learn from conventional wisdom and turns it on its head.

The author – he has no name; we’ll call him the Teacher – is an old man reflecting back on his long life. And he basically determines that everything is meaningless. “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity! What do people gain from their toil under the sun?” Life is hard, and what’s the point?

The Teacher declares that he has tried out all the things that are supposed to make life good and meaningful. He pursues wisdom and knowledge; he becomes good and righteous. But righteousness and wisdom are meaningless, he says, because life’s not fair and the wicked often win.

Then he acquires great wealth and possessions, all the extravagance and pleasure you can imagine. But he determines *that’s* all empty and vain because none of it lasts.

Finally, the Teacher works hard to make a name for himself, to leave some legacy on God’s good earth. But that too he finds pointless because, he says, you die, and then people forget you.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God? If you’re skeptical, don’t worry; throughout Judeo-Christian history *many* people have asked, “How did *this* make it into the Bible?”

Perhaps it helps to know that Ecclesiastes was written in a time of social upheaval. When the Jews came home from the Babylonian exile, they felt liberated, but they were still a conquered people, living under foreign empires. Over the next few centuries, one empire followed another...Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans – all a little different and yet the same – there is nothing new under the sun.

And with those political changes came economic changes, resulting in the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The cultural collisions of empire after empire led to religious changes as Jew met Greek met Egyptian met Arab. Traditional beliefs and worldviews shifted; everything that had felt clear and settled became much more complex and confusing.

Ecclesiastes is wisdom from and for a time of cultural deconstruction and existential angst. Which is good news for us, because we, too, live in a time of cultural deconstruction and existential angst, don't we? I mean, have you noticed how terrified, depressed, and generally grouchy we all are these days?

And you know, I believe there is some real value in having a book in the Bible that gives voice to our fear, our dread, our feelings of alienation. Professor Ellen Davis tells the story of one of her students, who experiences frequent bouts of depression and describes reading Ecclesiastes as, quote, "like slipping into a warm bath." A chaplain in Vietnam reported it was often the only part of the Bible his soldiers were willing to hear.¹

There is great power, in our darkest moments, in hearing that Word of the Lord reflects our experience back to us. In knowing that we are not alone in times of suffering and sorrow. That there is no dark place we can go where God has not already gone before us.

Speaking of words, there is one word that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes likes best of all. He uses it 38 times in this short book – 5 times in verse 2 alone! The Hebrew word is *havel*; our Bible translates it 'vanity.' Other translations read 'futility,' 'absurdity,' 'emptiness,' 'meaninglessness.' However you slice it, we get the point.

But those are all metaphorical renderings of the word *havel*. Because literally, it means vapor, mist. A breath, something that disperses in the wind, is here one minute and gone the next.

Which is to say, when the Teacher cries at the beginning of the book, "*Havel of havels*, all is *havel*!" he might be declaring that life is vain and meaningless. But he also may be saying that life is short. It's fleeting, ephemeral. Life is like a mist that blows away in the wind. Blink too long, and it's over.

It changes our reading (doesn't it?) if the Teacher is not declaring that life is absurd, but rather that it is unfathomably, even tragically, short. The very brevity – the *fleetingness* – of life makes it precious. Reading *havel* literally, vapor of vapors, changes Ecclesiastes from a grumpy cynic saying life is meaningless to a nostalgic old man saying, "Life is short, *carpe diem*! Or as the kids say, YOLO – you only live once.

No amount of wisdom will prolong our lives indefinitely. The mystery of time, of God, of our life on earth is not something we can ever fully understand. The only thing we can do with life...is live it! Which is a good thing, because *living* is exactly what life is for!

That's the conclusion the Teacher comes to. Christine read it in chapter 9: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart." Dress well, live well, love well, work well. Whatever you do, do it with gusto. Because this is the life God has given us.

To those who would be wise, Ecclesiastes commends two things: Joy. And humor.

Over and over this Lent, our Scriptures have asked, "What is wisdom?" and they've answered it differently. Proverbs said, "Wisdom is relationship;" Psalms said, "Wisdom is being in the presence of God;" Song of Songs said, "Wisdom is intimacy." And here Ecclesiastes tells us, "Wisdom is enjoying our lives and not taking ourselves so darn seriously."

Vapor of vapors. All is vapor. Friends this is the Teacher's good news. He strips away all our pretensions, our principles, our philosophies, takes us right down to the bare basics of who we are. We are dust. We are vapor. We are human beings, set in relationship with God and one another.

It is, so often, those very pretensions, principles, and philosophies that keep us from enjoying life, is it not? And that get in the way of our relationship with God, and with one another.

So let them blow away, the Teacher says, like the vapors that they are. Eat, drink, work, love, enjoy.

Life is for living. So live it! Amen.

¹ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2000) p. 159