

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

This is the soundbite of Ecclesiastes that was most familiar - well until "For everything there is a season" was made famous by the Byrds.

But overall, the recurring phrase of this book is "vanity of vanities, all is vanity, a chasing after the wind."

This is the only time in our entire lectionary cycle that we read from this baffling book. No wonder, it's not exactly cheerful sermon fodder, especially the excerpts we read today. Its inclusion in Scripture was often questioned, and now we accept its inclusion but generally prefer to avoid it. What are we supposed to do with such thoughts?

The truth is that Ecclesiastes makes me uncomfortable, not because the ideas it conveys are so foreign, but because they are so familiar. They are the anxieties that hover around my mind and heart, which I am more successful at ignoring some times than others.

Ecclesiastes is the Greek translation of Qoheleth, the voice speaking in this book. Qoheleth means 'the one who gathers', who our translation calls 'the teacher'.

This teacher begins by recounting how he sought meaning and pleasure in his life - by seeking wisdom, by building, working hard, and buying whatever he wanted, by seeking pleasure in women and food and wine. Yet in all of these pursuits, he concluded that "All is vanity, a chasing after the wind." None of these things have any guarantee.

The speaker's great struggle is that even if one found what one sought, there is no guarantee of getting to enjoy it - the wise and righteous may die young, while evil people may live long lives.

Whatever is acquired is left to others, and you have no idea what they will do with it. There is great evil in the world, and it is impossible to stop all of the oppression. We can try to change the way things are, but we cannot stop all of the evil. Some are born to a life of struggle, and some are born with so much, and we are left to wonder why. Any of this sound familiar yet?

This teacher has much, and tries to find out how to live a good and meaningful life - perpetually seeking, striving, questioning. In the end, nothing we do matters, nothing lasts. In the end, we fade even from memory.

What is the point of all our struggle? It is like chasing after the wind.

All is vanity.

What is the meaning of this phrase, especially this word that the speaker keeps using?

The Hebrew word is *hevel*, typically translated vanity. It can also be translated absurdity, futility, though even that does not entirely convey it's meaning. It also can mean breath, mist, vapor - the same imagery as chasing after the wind. The idea it is trying to convey is something ephemeral and most of all, impossible to grasp.

Interestingly, this word is also used as a name once in Scripture - we know him as Abel, the son of Adam and Eve killed by his brother who was jealous and ashamed that Abel's sacrifice was honored and his was not. This is not likely a coincidence - what other life so captures all that is inexplicable and unsettling about human life than a young person whose life is cut short because of senseless violence and jealous rage? Abel is the very first human being to die - and he represents all of how unnatural and simply senseless death can be.

We've had our fair share of this lately, so many lives cut off senselessly, violently. It seems like there are more every time we turn on the news - black lives, blue lives, victims of terrorism from within and without our country. The randomness and senselessness of these violent deaths makes understanding and preventing them seem impossible and leaves us living in a cloud of anxiety and fear from which we cannot escape.

And this is when I find Ecclesiastes wonderful - there is no smoothing over, no platitudes, no simple explanations to unanswerable questions. In so many situations today too, there are no simple answers, and I find it comforting that someone so long ago felt the same confusion. And if you have ever received simple answers or platitudes while facing a senseless trauma, then you also may have experienced the freedom of someone simply recognizing this truth.

Life is hard and much of what goes on in our world is impossible to understand or explain. It is true, and in the recognition, we find shared humanity. We remember that we are not alone in our time.

But this is not the full picture of what the speaker has to say. There is another common word in this book - gift. Even if we have no answer to the question, we are not left with a despairing and resigned, "What is the point?"

Life is a gift.

Even in the face of all that seems vain and absurd, the teacher insists that we can still know joy. In fact, just like absurdity, joy has its own qualities like a mist - neither grasped nor controlled, just received and enjoyed.

Ecclesiastes encourages us to live deeply, not ignoring or smoothing over the pain and struggle that life entails, but equally living into and enjoying all that is good, receiving life as the gift that it is for the time that we have it.

For all that life is incredibly hard and sometimes senseless, Ecclesiastes still claims that it can be *good*. In fact, the main advice of the speaker is to find joy in life - and he sees this in

primarily three areas - sensual pleasures such as eating and drinking, intimate relationships - both sexual and deep friendships, and finding pleasure in our work.

For all that we strive after, aren't these the most good and beautiful aspects of our lives? Gathering around good food and drink is sacred, and we are given bodies that require us to do so every day. Having others with whom we are close who share and witness to our life make life good, even when difficult.

After the passage we read today, it may surprise you that the teacher comes around to encouraging us to find pleasure in our work. Yet I found this to be one of the most profound parts of the book - finding a healthy attitude to work, or as scholar Ellen Davis says, a sane theology of work, which is badly needed in contemporary society.

Despite 'hating his toil', he never stops encouraging hard work, and he says that there is hardly anything better than finding pleasure in work, not the competition and rivalry that too often distract, and not necessarily for the results - but simply, for the pleasure of the work. Perhaps in work we can see best the heart of the struggle of receiving these joys as a gift.

For most of us, some combination of these three of these aspects of our lives - pleasure, relationships, work - are the ones we most often expect to give us meaning, identity, and spiritual satisfaction, and so they are the ones we try most to grasp and control to fit perfectly into who we want to be and how we want our lives to go.

But when we do so, we too will find it to be like chasing the wind, unable to be held any more than a mist. Only when we give up trying to control and grasp that which we cannot, will we be able to receive joy and realize the deep goodness of life.

The invitation of this baffling book is to see life as it is, to strip off the masks and layers of shame and fear that prevent us from facing the realities of life. And that sounds like a terrible idea until we remember how often those very times when life is hard, it is often when we are able to see that it is also good and beautiful. Because the truth is that whatever numbs us from the pain of life also deprives us from knowing joy; whatever protects us from the darkness also shades us from the Light.

Those who have been Light in my life are those who have been able to enter the darkness with me, who are able to know it and name it for what it is. And with them, celebration is all the sweeter - our ability to walk through the difficult and inexplicable parts of life also makes us able to share in all that makes life beautiful.

In some ways, this is the wonder of Ecclesiastes - it is able to name, to describe, the nature of our life, the truth and fears that linger at the edge of our minds and hearts, and in doing so, it lets us know that we are not alone in it.

We are not alone. No matter what we face in this life, whatever we fear, we are not alone and never will be. In pointing us to this truth, Ecclesiastes points us to the Gospel - the

good news that God is with us in life. God was born like us, and lived through all the depths of life that we face, experiencing the joys of life with others, known for eating and drinking with all, a life ended young by senseless and cruel violence, entangled in the tribal passions and evil systems that are part of our world and beyond our understanding.

In Christ, God did not explain the inexplicable; Jesus did not show us how to grasp the ungraspable - rather, God joined us. This Christ walked into the darkness with us. And the darkness did not overcome him.

The Light lived on - Christ rose again and gives us the hope that the darkness will not overcome us.

Whatever you fear, whatever anxieties plague you, they are not stronger than the Light that is with you. Whatever you face, you will not face it alone.

Where there is pain, there will be joy.
Where there is brokenness, there will be goodness.
Where there is death, there will be life.

Life that can never be controlled, because it is life that is good, life that is beautiful, life that is a gift.

Life that can never be grasped, because it is life that is always new and abundant.

Love that can never be explained, because it is love beyond what we can imagine.
Love that can never be measured because it is love that will never end.

Amen.