

Everything is Hevel©

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 3:1-17

July 26, 2015

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Hevel of Hevels. Would you all agree that everything is *hevel*?

I can't help but use the few favorite words in Hebrew that I learned a long time ago and still remember today. The Hebrew word *hevel* is translated as *vanity*. And so, the author of Ecclesiastes writes "*hevel of hevel's – vanity of vanities. Everything is vanity!*"

Eugene Peterson, in the Message, translates it as smoke.

"Smoke. There's nothing to anything. It's all smoke."

In other words, what's the point of working ourselves to the bone? What's the meaning of all we do? Life is so – fleeting. The entire mood of Ecclesiastes sounds rather negative, doesn't it? Like my cousin used to say – "What *difference* does it make?" Or as my step-dad loved to say – "It won't matter a hundred years from now anyway."

According to Eugene Peterson, Bible scholar and translator of The Message, Ecclesiastes used to be the assigned reading during one of the greatest celebrations the Israelites held.

The Feast of Tabernacles celebrated God's bounty and blessing. It was a time to give thanks and celebrate the bounty of the grain harvest and it was combined with remembering and giving thanks for God's preservation of the Israelites when they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. In that time, God provided manna – a miraculous bread for the people to eat that kept them from going hungry.

So, at the Feast of Tabernacles two joyful things were celebrated – both to give thanks to God for His many blessings of the abundant life God gave to his people.

Peterson says that it is significant that Ecclesiastes was the assigned reading during this time of the great celebration of the harvest – the Feast of Tabernacles. He writes:

"Isn't it interesting that the most negative of the biblical scrolls was required reading at the most positive of festivals?"

The joining together of the Feast of Tabernacles and Ecclesiastes (this most negative writing in the Bible) was a message to the people of God: as long as you're in touch with the God of blessing, the yes God says to you through that blessing maintains its character as God's yes.

But, if there's a separation between the God of blessing and the blessing of God, grave dangers threaten the people of God at the point of separation."

In other words, we'd better not forget where our blessings come from. If we enjoy God's blessings but separate ourselves from the one who gives the blessings – God – then we are in danger.

I appreciate Peterson writing that this book is the most negative of all the books of the Bible. I guess I never thought of it that way until this past week when I began studying and trying to get a sense of what to preach from these texts.

Of course, I was reading Ecclesiastes with my mind also on everything else I had going on this week. I had a funeral on Monday for a woman in the community – not a member of our congregation. Last year I had her son's funeral.

And then, I was at the hospital with someone having surgery, and another woman who was dying – Beatrice Johnston (Claudia's mother).

I did a graveside service on Thursday for one of our former members – Virginia McDonald – hose funeral service was 2 years ago. And then yesterday I had the service for Beatrice Johnston, who passed away later that night after I visited.

Do any of you remember the song from the 1960's by the singing group, the Byrds? "Through everything Turn, Turn, Turn, there is a season, Turn, Turn, Turn, and a time to every purpose unto heaven.

Some of you may remember it from the soundtrack for the movie Forest Gump. I especially think of the scene when Jenny gets on a bus marked *Berkley to DC* and gives Forest the peace sign as they are driving away, leaving Forest standing there saying sadly, "Goodbye Jenny."

Hevel of Hevel – all of life is fleeting.

So, you may be wondering how and why this downer of a book could possibly be called Wisdom Literature, or, why it belongs in this book we call *The Holy Bible, the Book of Life, The Book of Love*.

Well, here's the thing. The Teacher of this Wisdom book is saying: Life – and everything in it, including humans – comes and goes.

All of life is a bit like the ebbing tide – it comes in and it splashes over the sand, depositing shells and seaweed and all sorts of things.

And then it goes out again, taking with it some of the things it brought in. It is a rhythm that moves day in and day out. Coming and going.

The Teacher is saying that life is like that. We are born, we live, we work, we love, and we die. And what is it for? Each generation, he says, is the same.

It's a skeptical outlook for sure.

Except that there is an exception, and we know what that exception is, do we not? We learn about it for sure in the New Testament. We have to remember that The Teacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes did not have the New Testament, did not have the good news of Jesus Christ, or the knowledge and hope of new, transforming, eternal life through God's Son.

And yet, there still is a message of hope in this old wisdom writing. It is about the providence of God. It is the faith statement that God is in charge.

"I know," writes the author, "that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, *so that all should stand in awe before him*. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by."

God is the creator of the seasons; God is the creator of the sun and the moon, the day and the night; of life and of death. God is the one who makes it all "turn, turn, turn, turn."

Yes, it's true; all of life is somewhat fleeting. *Hevel of hevels. Vanity of vanities*. What good is it all, *unless* ... and this is the point ... unless God is the focus of all our life; Unless we dwell in him who makes life so worthwhile.

The knowledge that life is fleeting but that God is in charge of the order of things should lead us to a humble awe of our creator. It should lead us to delight in the gifts of God.

Martin Luther writes of the misplaced desire that Ecclesiastes seeks to address:

"What is being condemned in this book, therefore, is not the creatures [i.e. the things God has created] but the depraved affection and desire of us men, who are not content with the creatures of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate riches, honors, glory, and fame, as though we were going to

live here forever; and meanwhile we become bored with the things that are present, and continually yearn for other things – and then still others.”¹

He wrote that in the 16th century in Europe, but wouldn't you agree that we here in the 21st century in the United States, and all over the world, are still that way today? We are constantly looking for more, striving for bigger things. Yet, what is it all for?

When I look back on the three funeral services I had this week, and the many I've done in the 19 years I've been ordained, I always feel a certain amount of sadness. I look at the wonderful pictures of the person throughout their life and I am eager to hear the stories and memories of the family.

I don't really agree with The Teacher of Ecclesiastes when he writes that people won't be remembered. Maybe that is true hundreds of years from now but people live on and on in the memories and stories of their loved ones.

And then, of course, there is the rest of the story. The story that says life doesn't end with death; that death has been conquered by the power of God through the resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The rest of the story is that there *is* purpose to life, but it's a topsy turvey kind of life that values different things than what we humans always seem to lean toward.

Instead of the wealth we chase after, Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor." Instead of the powerful, Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek."

And ...

"Blessed are the merciful; Blessed are the peacemakers; Blessed are those who are persecuted."

We have to figure out where we are in those blessings. But, we have been given this very hopeful promise – if you are an Easter person – if you follow the teachings of the most important, wisest teacher of all – if you are a student of the resurrected Jesus, then you know life as it is meant to be and you have no fear, for life has been given to you – forever.

That's the place I try to lead us to in a funeral service. A service we of the Reformed faith call "A Witness to the Resurrection." Just in that title we are saying so much. Life is transitioning. Life is ending as we know it, but it is beginning in an eternal place of glory and love and peace.

¹ Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," *Luther's Works*, vol. 15, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), p. 8.

I end this morning with that wonderful passage from Revelation 21:1-4, written by John when he was a prisoner on Patmos and had this vision of the last days:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

There will be no more *hevel* of *hevels*. Everything is **not hevel**. The things of this world are fleeting, for sure. But, in Jesus Christ there is meaning and eternal life. Our lives are not in vain as long as we stay connected to the one who gives us all these promises; all these blessings.

Thanks be to God for the amazing things he has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ.
Amen!

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