SEEKING SEEKING DOM THREE-PART SERMON SERIES

UNDER THE SUN

UNDER THE SUN

ECCLESIASTES 1:2, 12-14; 2:12-26

Last week, we began a three-week sermon series on the wisdom books of the Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. To help us keep the three books and their unique perspectives on God's wisdom straight in our minds, we imagined them as three people, three teachers, we could learn from: the brilliant young teacher of Proverbs, the sharp, middle-aged critic of Ecclesiastes, and the weathered, seen-a-few-things old man, Job.

Our brilliant young teacher, Lady Wisdom from Proverbs, encouraged us to learn wisdom and do wisdom, unpicking every situation and decision to discover the wise response that lets us cooperate with God in his plans and purposes; with the promise, of course, that we'd live the good life of the healthy, wealthy and wise as a result. A good place to start...but we know that even doing our very best to live wisely in God's world doesn't stop trouble and hardship from coming our way. And that's where the sharp, middle-aged critic of Ecclesiastes comes in today: with a reality check, and a way forward.

The Teacher starts off with the point of the whole book: everything is "vanity." He's seen it all, done it all, tried it all...and found no meaning in it at all. Not an uplifting way to begin.

Because it's such an important word in this particular book, let's spend a moment unpacking "vanity." I admit, when I hear vanity, I think of the bathroom furnishing – the bit with the sink and the drawers and the mirror above – and I think of the sort of person who likes to spend a lot of time in front of that mirror...contemplating their physical appearance and being self-congratulatory about everything from their face to their clothes to their accomplishments. But that's not quite what the Teacher is referring to.

The Hebrew word that's in the original ancient version of this book – hevel – doesn't translate well. Depending on your Bible, the opening line of this book might be vanity, vanity; meaningless, meaningless; useless, useless; futility, futility. But hevel is kind of a poetic word that suggests smoke or vapour: fleeting, mysterious, impossible to grasp in the hand, obscuring our eyes, as difficult to pin down as it is to chase and try to catch the wind.

So life is probably not without meaning, according to the Teacher; but he can't see what that meaning is, and every time he's tried to grab onto it, it dissipates like fog in the sunshine. The Teacher arrived at this poetic but still kind of depressing conclusion after years of experimentation, seeking a good and meaningful life in all sorts of ways. He started with what Lady Wisdom teaches us in Proverbs, basically: seeking wisdom.

The Teacher describes his quest for wisdom, but even though he was very successful in his learning and doing, gaining great wisdom, he found that it was all smoke and vapour in the end, as futile as chasing the wind. If anything, he found that greater wisdom, greater knowledge of God's blueprint for reality and God's own way of acting, led to greater frustration and even sorrow.

After that, the Teacher kind of went off the rails, setting God's wisdom aside and immersing himself in the world's wisdom instead. He indulged in all kinds of pleasure, both the fun and frivolous kind and the pleasures of accomplishment, acquiring ridiculous wealth

and doing big projects, too, like building irrigation systems for orchards. The Teacher was doing all kinds of admirable things, working hard and diligently, being a high achiever. But nothing mattered all that much, in the end; he found these accomplishments, possessions, and pleasures just as empty of real meaning, no real gain at all.

So the Teacher turned back to wisdom, realising that wisdom is better than foolishness in the same way that light is better than dark, that the sight of the wise is better than being a fool stumbling around in the dark. But then, here comes the twist: the same fate – dying – is in store for the wise and the foolish, so what's the point in being wise at all?

Somewhere along the way, through his work, his pleasure-seeking, his deep study of the wisdom of God, the Teacher had hoped to discover...something to fill some inner hunger. He longed to discover the meaning and purpose of his life, to find a way to stave off the inevitable suffering and hardship that we all experience at some point, to some degree, in our lives. Instead, he discovered that our lives are brief, in the grand scheme of time and creation; that, good life well-lived or bad life, selfishly-lived, we all end the same way; and that, very often, the cause-and-effect, do good to get good logic of Proverbs just fails. The Teacher's quest for meaning led him to conclude that God has given human beings the unhappy busy-work of life to keep us occupied. And that's it. As gloomy as the Teacher's conclusion is, he is teaching us something that we seem constantly in need of relearning: what our hearts long for cannot be found in most of the places we go looking for it. We wear ourselves out with the effort to build a life of lasting satisfaction, security and happiness: money, nice possessions, personal accomplishments, enjoyable experiences. But those things really can dissipate like smoke when trouble blows through our lives, swiftly becoming meaningless in the face of hardship. Those things can also feel like a waste of time, in the end, when no greater sense of purpose or meaning to life suddenly becomes obvious to us once we've got them all.

For a reasonably-comfortable person in our society, there are near-endless opportunities for indulging ourselves, for buying things, for having interesting experiences, like travel or a good meal at a nice restaurant or going to a live show. There are near-endless just causes or social movements to embrace, too, if a more obvious make-life-good-for-all approach is what we want. And those causes are good and just and important...but what any one movement can accomplish is like tossing a pebble into the ocean and expecting an island to appear. I think, if we're honest, we get frustrated and a little hopeless, from time to time, like the Teacher when, having learned much of God's wisdom, God's blueprint for reality, found only frustration and sorrow in the end.

There's this scene described in a book by an author I really like, writing back in the mid-twentieth century. The main character, a version of the author, is taking the bus into the city first thing in the morning. And the bus is full of men going to work. He sees all the signs and symbols of their ordinary, moderately successful, reasonably satisfied lives. He listens to them talk about work, about money, about family problems. And, with a fair degree of arrogance – the main character is on his own quest for meaning, of course – with a lot of arrogance, he looks at the men around him, and he pities them. He says that they have rolled themselves up into a ball in their well-off security, in the routine of daily toil. He says that they are like termites, building up walls around themselves made of the pieces of their moderately successful, reasonably satisfied lives, in order to protect themselves from the unanswerable questions, the great problems of life: like what does it all mean? Is there any point to any of it, or is it all as insubstantial as smoke, as useless as trying to catch the wind?

According to the Teacher, this sharp, middle-aged critic, the answer is yes; there is a point to all of it...but the point is probably not what we think it is.

At the very end of Ecclesiastes, the purpose for writing this particular book of wisdom is revealed to us. And it's not to cope with the Teacher's mid-life crisis, in case that's what you're thinking. It's to be like a goad to the sheep.

In my experience with moving a flock of sheep, it's easiest when you've got someone in front, leading the way, and something at the back to keep the easily distracted from falling behind or wandering off. There's always an interesting-looking clump of grass or a bit of the horizon that needs staring at, apparently, when it comes to moving sheep. That's why you often see a shepherd out front with one or two of those amazingly well-trained dogs at the back, barking and running to turn and drive the flock. Without a dog, though, that rear position can be managed by a shepherd with stick or the flat side of a shepherd's crook, tapping woolly bums to turn them or get them moving.

The Teacher, it seems, is not so gentle a shepherd as to tap or nudge; he prefers a goad, a sharp pointy stick, to urge his flock forward...and that is what this rumination on wisdom and life and what it all means is meant to be: a sharp pointy stick, a jab to get us moving, to get us thinking and examining our lives. Because when the Teacher says that life is vanity, vanity; meaningless, meaningless; futility, futility...well, he's not entirely wrong. An unexamined life, a life lived without any awareness of the more that is out there, a life lived selfishly or thoughtlessly or in ways that hurt or harm you or another...yes, eventually you or someone observing your life is going to conclude that it was meaningless. But life, and the capacity to live it for an unknown span of time, is all we have.

Throughout the rest of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher is going to develop this point, try to persuade us, with the sharp pointy stick of wisdom, that life is indeed full of meaning, if we have the wisdom to see it. He hints, at the end of our reading today, about what the answer really is: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God."

He's come full circle: from wisdom that led to sorrow and frustration, through the pleasures and accomplishments of a high-achieving life, to wisdom again that he thought failed to have the larger moral shape to it that God's wisdom ought to have, because the wise and foolish alike all end the same. And finally, he comes to an understanding that the ordinary things of life – food and drink, hard work, unexciting pleasures and the necessities of each day – are from God. And a good life, lived wisely and well, is simply that: finding meaning and purpose in what God gives us. The book of Proverbs, our training manual for wisdom, had the right of it, to some extent. Learning God's wisdom, learning to see God's blueprint of reality, the pattern of wisdom underlying each decision or action or word of ours, is absolutely a good practice, and the fear of the Lord – honouring him, feeling awe, following God – even the Teacher agrees that this is the beginning and the centre of wisdom and the good life. But there's a promise that's kind of implied throughout Proverbs, that if we live wisely according to God's wisdom, then our lives will be successful and satisfied and good; the old healthy, wealthy, and wise equation.

That's not our ordinary reality, though; when life is like that, it's great, but we know there's no guarantee of health and wealth every day of our often tooshort lives. And that is where our sharply critical, seen-it-all, done-it-all Teacher comes in. Yes, our lives are small and brief on the grand scale of the universe, which we know is billions of years old and millions of kilometers wide. Yes, we are going to die, and though God's Son has taken the sting and despair of that away for us, loss is still hard for us to endure. And no, we can't control anything in our lives with absolute certainty outside of our own thoughts and words and actions; we can work diligently and wisely to build safety and security for ourselves and our families, we can act justly to improve the lives of others...but even then, we can't control every outcome.

But we can have that first cup of coffee in the morning – the one that blows out all the cobwebs and gets us moving – and know that every part of that moment, from the coffee to the morning to the day that lies ahead, all of it is a gift from God's hand. We can listen to the ships honking at each other on the river on a foggy morning, and see it as God's gift to us. We can accomplish something, like a renovation project, or baking a pie, or finishing a book, and know that our ability and creativity, the objects themselves, the work and effort put in, the time spent, all of it, is a gift from God. We can have a meal with friends, and see God's gifts to us in the meal, the relationships, and in having that moment, just the span of one dinner, to enjoy both. We can even act justly for whatever social cause fires our hearts, whether it's sharing our resources through a food drive, or being diligent about recycling, or speaking against any of the great ills of our society, and know that both the drive and the capacity to do so are gifts from God.

Life is both real and touchable, and easily blown away, like smoke; both ordinary and mysterious; and a constant gift from God.

That is the surprising wisdom of Ecclesiastes, the meaning of life that our Teacher arrived at, after his realisation that the great questions that must be asked are both too complex to answer and too simple to appreciate without learning God's wisdom. But he needed to hit the bottom, recognise the fragile, insubstantial nature of life, before he could find God revealed in the ordinary.

Every moment is a gift from God; it's not too difficult to be okay with that, when the moment is ordinary or wonderful or good; harder perhaps, when the present moment is a time of pain or uncertainty or suffering. But that is a question for next Sunday and our last book of wisdom and for our final teacher, Job.

For now, though, I think our Teacher would challenge us to embrace life in all its ordinariness and its mystery; to let God reveal his wisdom to us in each moment, knowing that our eating and drinking, our work and our rest, all of it, is a gift from God. Thanks be to God! Amen.