



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Teacher, Goldilocks, and San Diego Sunshine”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Ecclesiastes 2: 1-11, 3: 1-8

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So, I think if Goldilocks were to ever try to find a new home away from that cabin in the woods, she very well might find it in San Diego, CA. After spending 8 days there for the annual meeting and conference of our National Association of churches, I am convinced that being a meteorologist in San Diego takes about as much skill and effort as being a snow-plow driver in Miami. I genuinely think that there are days in which we see more variance in our weather in 24 hours than San Diego sees in an entire year. It's actually funny to watch the weather reports at night – Monday, 71 and sunny; Tuesday, 70 and mostly sunny; Wednesday, 71 and sunny; but watch out for Thursday, it's a heat wave with full sun and the highs reaching 74! Sharon and the kids were actually out at a park while I was in one of our meetings, and a young man working at the park referred to the gorgeous, 74 degree day, and said, 'we just need a little breeze to cut through the heat!'

Now, we're going to come back to what, at least to me, is the meteorological perfection of San Diego, but, there I was – sitting in an outdoor courtyard at our hotel, reflecting on what message I would share in worship this morning, and reading the words of the teacher in Ecclesiastes that George had selected for today – but to start, I went back to the beginning. “Vanity of vanities, says the teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” That's how the book of Ecclesiastes starts, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” I always find it interesting to preach on the portion of Scripture known as ‘Wisdom Literature.’ Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes – these are all books of the Bible that are known as Wisdom Literature – the key characteristic of which is that these are not books that are, for the most part, theological. These are not books that are meant to teach us the character or nature of God, these are texts that are written to help us understand and thrive within the realities of God's creation. They aren't meant to teach us about God, they are meant to teach us about the world that God created – they aren't intended to show us how to live in faith, they are intended to show us how to live within the order of things that God established. And, the ‘Qoheleth,’ or ‘teacher,’ in Ecclesiastes focuses much of his time on this very concept with which he opens the text, “Vanity of Vanities! All is Vanity!”

Now, I think when we hear the word vanity it immediately conjures up images of Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe, Julia Roberts, Scarlett Johansenn, or whoever the iconic leading ladies of your generation happened to be. But, the vanity of which the teacher speaks here is ‘chasing after the

wind.’ It’s vanity in the sense of doing things in vein – it’s the fruitless toil towards unattainable ends on which we spend so much of our time, energy and spirit. That’s the vanity of which the teacher speaks.

- He speaks in the latter portions of the first chapter on chasing after wisdom – which turns out to be vanity, chasing after the wind.
- He speaks in the second chapter, that we read, about chasing after the pleasures of the world...palaces and vineyards, servants and silver – which he learns too is vanity, chasing after the wind.

It’s not a lesson about theology – it’s not a mandate of faithfulness – it’s not a characteristic of God – it’s a truth of the human condition within the realm of God’s creation. That’s what stood out to me, in such a unique and palpable way, as I was reflecting on this message while sitting in that courtyard on that perfect 73 degree day of San Diego sunshine. We spend an incalculable, mind-numbing, heart-wrenching amount of time, energy and spirit in pursuit of our Goldilocks perfections. Sitting, in that moment, in an area that (at least in my personal perspective) has a climate that is almost perfect, I couldn’t help but consider the amount of our life that is spent trying to get to that. In our careers, our families, our finances, our property, our health, the list goes on and on and on...we spend day after day, month after month, year after year, looking at the things that are too this or too that (or not enough this or not enough that), and our journey becomes increasingly defined by the vanity of our efforts instead of the blessings of our days. Towards pleasure, towards wisdom, towards a thousand other things – we try and try to create that Goldilocks perfection of the San Diego sunshine, and our life becomes more and more about the vanity of chasing after the wind that we will never, ever, catch.

The irony in all of this, for me, was that I did much of my initial reflection for this message (and the worship development around it) in that courtyard in San Diego early this week. Between the meetings that I was attending, the travels to get home, and the things that needed to be done here as soon as I got home, however – I didn’t actually sit down to put words on paper until yesterday morning. So, my initial reflections happened while I was enwrapped in the glorious climate of San Diego, but my words didn’t reach the page until I was huddled in my air-conditioned living room protecting myself from the triple digit heat-indexes that were sparking warnings all over southern Wisconsin. And, yes, there was a part of me (when I went to take care of a few things outside) that longed, for a moment, for that moderate climate of Southern California. It’s a natural part of the human condition – to long for the better, the greater, the Goldilocks perfection.

But, the teacher draws our attention, after two chapters on the vanity of chasing after the wind, to the words that George focused on this morning – that there is a time for everything. And, after those words, the teacher goes on in the third chapter by saying,

“What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time...I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

Now, remember, Wisdom Literature is not meant to reveal something remarkable or groundbreaking about God, about theology, or about anything else. And, I’m not suggesting that

I am revealing some kernel of never-before-spoken wisdom that is going to change your life forever. But, I think there is some value in stepping back, now and then, to consider how much of our time, our energy and our spirit is being spent on our Goldilocks pursuits of San Diego sunshine. Because, I would bet that, for the vast majority of us, our lives are being defined by the vanity of those pursuit far more often, and far more extensively, than we even realize. Consider...how many of our minutes, our hours and our days are being defined by that which we don't have? Every day, every moment, is filled with the blessings of God that are ours to be embraced and enjoyed – but how many of them do we miss because we were too focused on attaining our Goldilocks perfection and San Diego sunshine?

It's not that we don't strive to make the most of God's blessings, and it's not that reaching for a better life is a problem in and of itself. But, step back now and then to consider how often that pursuit is causing your life to be defined by the vanity of chasing after the wind. My guess is that, if we're honest about it, it will be far more often that we ever realize. And, my guess, is that we are, more often than not, missing the true joy that God longs for us to know in embracing the blessing of the moment that is the moment we are in – whatever, whenever and wherever that may be. My guess is that, if we are honest about it, we will see that far too many of our moments are being defined by the vanity of chasing after the wind while we miss out on the blessing and gift of the moment that is now!