



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Plan for Tomorrow, But...”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Ecclesiastes 1: 1-4, 12-17; 2: 1-11

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I don't know how much of it is pure human nature and how much of it is engrained in us by society (I'm guessing it's probably a little bit of both), but one of those things that I have come to understand is that we spend an enormous portion of our lives looking towards what's next.

- As children, we are perpetually focused on growing up. We naturally gravitate towards older kids because they help us feel older and more grown. As children we look at what the bigger kids know, what they are able to do and where they are allowed to go, and we want it too. When we're five we want to be eight, when we're eight we're longing after the life of a twelve year-old, and when we're twelve, we can't wait to be in high school.
- Then we get into those high school years and realize they weren't all we thought they'd be. All of a sudden, what we thought were going to be the wonderful care-free years of high school are riddled with teen angst, increasing responsibilities, jobs, homework, battles with our parents, acne, relationships, break-ups, breakdowns... and we quickly realize that this is not what we expected. Before we know it, those teenage years are spent longing for those days of freedom and privilege that come in adulthood. Until, of course, we reach adulthood and realize it's not what we expected when we were 16.
- As adults we are confronted with bills, jobs, homes, families, schedules, house repairs, car failures... and stage by stage in adulthood we keep looking at what's next. We look towards that relationship that we hope becomes 'the one,' we look towards the family that we've always pictured in our heads, we look towards the house we've dreamed of, the job we've longed for, or any of a thousand other things. It may be as big as the lifelong drive towards retirement or as small as that car we wanted, the vacation we hoped for, or the bills we'd been working to pay off – but, the cycle remains the same. We look towards something, we work towards something, we spend time after time longing for something, and then we get there, and our minds immediately turn to what's next and our cycle of longing starts all over again!

That, I want to suggest, is exactly what we read about in Ecclesiastes. 'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher. All is vanity.' Not exactly the words of hope and joy that we'd like to get out of Scripture. I'm not sure, when most of us take the time to open our Bibles, that we are empowered or uplifted by a passage speaking to the pointlessness of life. But, there's a lot more to it than that, and I think these words (as harsh as they may sound on the surface) provide

essential instruction to those of us who sometimes get wrapped up in that endless cycle of constantly looking towards what's next.

Ecclesiastes is a book that falls into the Biblical category of what is known as 'Wisdom Literature.' Ecclesiastes, Job and Proverbs are the standouts of this type of text, and they serve a specific, and important, purpose in the Bible. Most books in the Bible tend to guide us, in some way or another, in our relationship with God – some tell us how we ought to live as God's children, some tell us what God has done for us, some tell us what God continues to do for us, but they all revolve around that particular context of humanity's evolving relationship with God. Wisdom literature, on the other hand, has a different focus.

Wisdom literature is not about our relationships with God, but about our existence in God's creation. Wisdom literature doesn't look to help us understand God or grow closer in our relationship with God. Wisdom literature seeks to help us better understand God's creation, and the order of the world in which we live. Wisdom literature is there to help us understand what life is really like, and how we can best live meaningfully within it.

So, that's the context of this passage. When the 'Teacher' (which is the title given to the author of this text) writes that 'all is vanity' – he does so with the specific purpose of trying to help us better live and embrace life in the natural order of God's creation. Keep that in mind. But, first, with all of that said, there's also a language piece we need to work out here.

'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher. All is vanity.' Here's the challenge – I'm not sure we really know what that word 'vanity' means, and even if we did, I'm not sure it gets to the point that the author was trying to make here. Some other common translations of this passage use the word 'meaningless.' 'All is meaningless' they say. But, that word comes with all sorts of implications that don't quite fit. So, bear with me for just a minute as we look at this word.

The word that our Bible translates as 'vanity,' that has also been translated as 'meaningless,' in the original Hebrew in which it was composed, is actually a word that is more along the lines of chasing after the wind or tilting at windmills. While it still falls short, I sometimes wonder if 'fruitless' wouldn't be a better word than 'vanity' or 'meaningless.' When the author says that everything is 'meaningless' or 'vanity,' what he's really saying is that so much of life, as we live it, is fruitless – it's like chasing after the wind or tilting at windmills – it simply doesn't get us where we think it's going to get us.

So, with all of that in mind, listen again to what the Teacher says (with my minor modifications).

"Fruitless! Fruitless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly fruitless! Everything is fruitless."

³ What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?

¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are fruitless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁶ I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷ Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

⁴ I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was fruitless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

You see, if we reframe that particular word a bit, I think the teacher's point becomes pretty clear.

- He studies, but it doesn't get him where he expects it to get him.
- He gains knowledge and wisdom but neither of them lead them to the place he anticipated.
- He moves on to worldly pleasures and drinks wine, laughs and 'embraces folly,' but nothing measures up to what he hoped for.
- He accumulates wealth greater than anyone has ever accumulated before – house, vineyards, slaves, herds, flocks, silver, gold, singers, a harem – he denies himself absolutely nothing in his pursuit of contentment in this life, but it all is fruitless.

Among other things, I think one of the lessons of this world the Teacher is trying to bring here is that, if we constantly live for what's next, it will never live up to what we expect, and the cycle will never end. In this poetic language translated in modestly confusing ways, the Teacher is trying to help us understand this basic element of the world and human nature – if we constantly live for tomorrow, we will never be content and happy with today. Let me say that again – if we constantly live for tomorrow, we will never be content and happy with today.

It's right after everything we've looked at so far that the Teacher continues with what is probably the most familiar passage of Ecclesiastes.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance...

It keeps going, and I'm not going to read all of it here, but the Teacher continues to follow this pattern until he reaches his pinnacle point in vs. 12 and 13 and states, *"I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."*

So, stick with me and put all of this together. The Teacher has already established that living for tomorrow will never work. No matter what we strive for, no matter what we long for, no matter what we seek to create in and through our lives, if we constantly live for what we are moving

towards, it will never live up to what we thought it would be, and we will never be happy with today. Then, the Teacher moves into this litany of events in which he points out that the time will come for all things – to weep, to mourn, to dance, to build up, to break down – life will bring all of those moments upon us, and working towards or away from any of them is chasing after the wind... is tilting at windmills... is fruitless! So, the Teacher says, *“I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”* In other words – live for today, because today is the only place you can and will find contentment in life.

One of my all-time favorite quotes comes from John Lennon in the song *Beautiful Boy*, when he says that, ‘Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.’

I don’t know if it is human nature or societal predisposition, but the reality is that we live most of our lives for tomorrow. From childhood through adulthood, we constantly look forward to what’s next...to what’s coming...to what’s ahead... and we repeatedly place our ultimate contentment and joy on that moment in which we might achieve whatever that is that we are working towards. And then we get there, it never quite lives up to our hyped-up expectations, and we simply move on with our tilting at windmills as we look towards whatever comes after that, and after that, and after that. All the while, life is happening right then and there and our fullest enjoyment of God’s blessings in each day is being clouded by our focus on that other blessing we think is yet to come.

Now, don’t get me wrong. This is not license to throw caution to the wind, leave school, quit our jobs, liquidate our retirement funds, and set sail around the world without a thought of tomorrow. Goals are good. Planning is justified and necessary. Looking ahead is not the problem. The question is not about what we are planning or pursuing. The question is what are we living for. The question is from where our contentment will come. The question is whether our joy will be defined by reaching what we’re moving towards or by taking stock in the gift of today. It’s ok to plan for tomorrow, but what the Teacher is trying to help us understand is that while we plan for tomorrow, we have to learn to live in the blessing of today.