

You're So Vain, You Probably Think This Sermon Is About You

The words of the teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there such a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new? It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

"I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

So I gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces ; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

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; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 16-8; 2:8-11; 24-25

Once upon a time in the strong walled city of Uruk there lived a great king named Gilgamesh. No one had ever seen or heard of anyone before quite like him- powerful, good looking, but arrogant. In fact he was so powerful and cruel the people of the strong walled city of Uruk went and found a wild man, a man named of Enkidu, to come into the city and match Gilgamesh strength for strength. After an enormous battle, the two men

became best friends. They became such best friends in fact that they went on an amazing journeys together- an epic journey to defeat the great giant named Humbaba- which they did. But, after one journey it is said that Gilgamesh and Enkidu angered the goddess Ishtar- Gilgamesh by refusing to marry her and Enkidu for actually slapping her face with the flank of the great bull of heaven. And she placed a death sentence upon their heads. Another god though, Shamash, intervenes and spares the life of Gilgamesh. No one, however, saves Enkidu. And with shock and sadness Gilgamesh buries his best friend.

And all of a sudden the world that Gilgamesh knew, the life that he knew, was thrown into utter chaos. Gilgamesh goes off into the wilderness to grieve his friend, and there he begins to look like Enkidu in a kind of desperate attempt to be with him again. Gilgamesh eventually returns realizing nothing was going to bring Enkidu back and feels this heavy sense that everything the two of them had lived and worked for was now for nothing, and that everything that he had worked would ultimately come to nothing, for everything would in time pass like Enkidu into death.

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What is it that gives your life meaning? What is it that gives you a sense of purpose?

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This is what the epic of Gilgamesh asks and it's what the entire book of Ecclesiastes asks as well. The works are intimately connected- Gilgamesh was a story well known in the ancient world, and stories and themes carry over from one to the another. The most striking connection being a great flood in the epic of Gilgamesh that

wipes out the world- all except one man, Utnapishtim. And here we see both Gilgamesh and the book of Ecclesiastes both struggling for wisdom about life and death and meaning. At some points these works even share entire phrases like “let your stomach be full and enjoy yourself while you can”, and how we toil and toil in vain.

So Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes has been called the strangest book of the Bible by at least one commentator. (With that kind of acclaim it’s a wonder I haven’t preached on it before with you.) And it’s true- it is a strange book. You just don’t find in Ecclesiastes the kind of optimism, whether genuine or fake, we expect from a ‘religious’ book- we never get the, ‘Well, of course we can’t prove anything, but we believe anyway’ kind of religious fist pumping. We get more of, ‘Well, I tried to have faith in this but I was disappointed, and then I tried to have faith in that, but it disappointed me’, and so on and so on.

For me this is also what makes it a fantastic and kind of refreshing book, too. In Ecclesiastes we encounter someone who is, yes, kind of dark and cynical and often seems hopeless- but one who is absolutely honest about his search, too. There’s an authenticity to Ecclesiastes that is dynamic and compelling- you never get the feeling that he’s just saying what he’s supposed to say to please the priests- but that it’s always from the gut. And the main question Qoheleth, the writer of the book engages, namely, ‘What’s the point of my existence- what’s the point of my being here?’ This is not a question of ancient history. The questions- Why am I here? What gives my life meaning? These are questions for today. These are questions for us here and now. In many ways Ecclesiastes could have been written fifteen days ago just as easily as fifteen hundred years ago.

Qoheleth, which in Hebrew means teacher, writes in the name of Solomon, though the language of the context of rest of the book makes it clear he is writing from a much later time, right off the bat let's us know what this book is about. 'Vanity of vanities', he says wearily, 'Everything is vanity.' Everything is in vain, everything is meaningless and futile. Cheery fellow, isn't he? Yeah, I remember one of my Old Testament professors saying once that Qoheleth is not a guy you want to invite to your party, and then he paused and added, unless you really, really have a lot of beer- though he never made it clear whether the beer was for Qoheleth or for the host.

Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity. Now, he's not talking about vanity in the sense of luxury. He's not railing against us having big houses and suvs. The word for vanity here is the word, *hevel*, and it means wind or breath, and other times it connotes nothingness or meaninglessness. So whether it's a wispy kind of a thing like wind, whether it's just plain nothingness itself, or whether it means something fake- Qoheleth is pointing to the impermanency of life- the transience of existence. And he doesn't pull any punches- everything, he says, everything is *hevel*, everything is just breath and nothingness.

Exactly like Gilgamesh did upon the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, Qoheleth is frustrated with the impermanency of life, that as solid as things seem it's really all just dust in the wind as a more contemporary poet put it. Both Qoheleth and Gilgamesh realize that no matter how great, and how fantastic, and how incredible they are and their deeds are in this life- the time is coming when they and their deeds will no longer be remembered. Indeed a time is coming even when the people who have forgotten about Qoheleth are themselves forgotten- he says strikingly.

And in the rest of the text Qoheleth talks about the ways he's tried to find meaning, to find something he can hang his hat on in life here and now.

He talks about wisdom for example- he says he was the recipient of a great wisdom- wisdom like no one else had ever received. He says he applied this wisdom to knowing all things, and it turns out that even this, even wisdom, as great as it is, doesn't last forever and can't unravel the mystery of God and figure God out. Even wisdom is *hevel*- is vanity, in the end.

So, maybe thinking something more concrete would be better, Qoheleth talks about all the material things he thought would bring him peace. Qoheleth says he was like those guys with the bumper stickers that say "He who dies with the most toys wins." He had silver and gold, huge pieces of land, kingdoms, and servants, singers- even concubines. He had everything, but in the end, he says, even all this, all this stuff was just so much chasing after the wind. In other words it was kind of all the same after a while, and after the newness wore off he was reminded that neither he nor his memory were going to be around much longer and his feeling of meaninglessness, of living in vain, wouldn't go away.

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Well, after coming back from the woods, Gilgamesh knew he couldn't stay as king- not until he made peace with himself. So, not knowing what else to do, Gilgamesh travels the ends the earth to find a man named Utanaphishtim- the Babylonian Noah I mentioned earlier who survived the great flood. On his way Gilgamesh ran into a woman who gave him this piece of wisdom: 'Gilgamesh where are you going? The life you pursue you will not find. When the gods created humanity, death for humanity they set

aside, retaining life for themselves alone. For you, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full, and enjoy yourself while you can by day and night, and enjoy each day as much as you can. Let your clothes be fresh, your head washed, and shower yourself in cool water. Pay attention to the little ones that hold on to your hand and let your lover enjoy your bosom. This is the work of humanity.’ (Paraphrased from Pritchard’s translation)

When Gilgamesh finds Utanapishtim, the wise old man says pretty much the same thing. He tells Gilgamesh that death is inevitable and that, “You have toiled without ceasing and what have you got? Though toil you wear yourself out, you’ve filled your body with grief, and you’re shortening your long life!” Not accepting this, Gilgamesh presses Utanapishtim for more, and reluctantly, the wise man tells Gilgamesh about a plant that brings eternal life. Gilgamesh goes and finds the plant only to have it stolen from him by a snake while exhausted by his journey, he sleeps by a pool. And finally, finally- peace washed over Gilgamesh. And he returns to Uruk, knowing everything including him, will have it’s end- but rather than fighting this, he makes the most of his rule- becoming the best king the people ever knew.

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It’s the same for Qoheleth. Almost the whole text is about where you can’t find meaning- how nothing lasts. But he isn’t all negative. At the tail end of this text Qoheleth finally finds one place, one small place we can find meaning. He writes, ‘There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.’ The places Qoheleth really finds lasting value in, even if it really isn’t all that lasting, the places Qoheleth finds real meaning in- is in the small, mundane, easily missed, ordinary moments of his life. The tiny, easily missed simple goodness of his food and wine for

instance, or the good feeling of falling asleep after a long days work. Or like Utanapishtim told Gilgamesh- in paying attention to the little one grasping at his hand. Everywhere Qoheleth was taught to expect meaning and value all in external, surface things- in becoming wise, becoming great, building a huge empire, or what have you- when he really thought about it, none of this measures up for even the most impressive building lasts but a breath in the great scheme of things. Nothing external lasts. And everyone, foolish, rich, poor- everyone ends up leveled by death at the end no matter how great they were in life- and nothing changes that. Building a life impressive in appearance is just that- appearance. Do we really seek meaning and value Qoheleth asks- then live in, suck the marrow out of, pay attention to the tiny, mundane, easily missed, moments of beauty.

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Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese monk who came of age during the War in his land. For his ability to articulate a vision of love and compassion even during all that suffering, none other than Martin Luther King Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. Nhat Hanh articulates perfectly Ecclesiastes admonition to make use of the time we have by enjoying our toil in a small piece he writes about washing the dishes. He writes: “Thirty years ago, when I was still a novice at Tu Hieu Pagoda, washing the dishes was hardly a pleasant task. During the Season of Retreat when all the monks returned to the monastery, two novices had to do all the cooking and wash the dishes for sometimes well over one hundred monks. There was no soap. We had only ashes, rice husks, and coconut husks, and that was all. Cleaning such a high stack of bowls was a chore, especially during the winter when the water was freezing cold...But,

while washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. At first glance, that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality... 'There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes.' If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not washing the dishes to wash the dishes. What's more we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. And if we can't wash our dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future- and we are incapable of actually living one minute of it.

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Friends, this day, this week, we have all the time we need- the time to enjoy eating and drinking with loved ones, and the time to enjoy our toil. May we wash the dishes of our lives for the sake of washing the dishes- and not just for the sake of being done to go on to the next mindless task. We have all the time we need- every minute of every day. **Amen.**