

August 5, 2007
First Evangelical Lutheran Church
Idaho Falls, Idaho

Before reading this sermon, I encourage you to first read the texts assigned for this day ~ Peace in Christ, Pastor Jeff

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14; 2:18-23 Psalm 49:1-12 Colossians 3:1-11 Luke 12:13-21

Through the ages, its been labeled as dark, at the very least baffling, and at the most wrongheaded with only a partial grasp of the truth. It has been said that atheists, when they quote the Bible, most often quote from this particular book of the Bible. Serious efforts were made to exclude it from the Bible and as it is there are only two times that it appears in the lectionary we use for worship: it appears as a reading for New Years' Day and it appears as a reading for today. So today is really the only time you will hear a very small part of this book of the Bible read to you in worship, just 10 verses read to you once every 3 years.

The book that I am referring to is the Book of Ecclesiastes. And just from the 10 verses you heard read today, can you understand why efforts would be made to exclude it from the Bible and why atheists like to quote from it? “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Vanity is not exactly a word that we use very often today, so what exactly does vanity mean? Perhaps the closest meaning today would be the word absurd. Absurdities of absurdities, says the Teacher. All is absurdity – and when the Teacher uses the word all, he means everything under the sun. Humans, creatures, creation, life, things that happen, things that people do – everything, all, is absurdity. Hear again how the Teacher put it: “I, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out

by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”

Take, for instance, our daily work, our using God-given skills to make something of our lives, to build a meaningful future. These are all things that are good and positive, things that we value in our lives, and yet the Teacher says, “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity - that is absurdity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is absurdity.”

So, how are you feeling about Ecclesiastes so far? Are you feeling encouraged and energized for the week ahead? Or are you feeling more in agreement with another description of this book, that Ecclesiastes provides the dark backdrop from which we can then see the light and Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ?

I wasn't able to find much concerning the debate over whether or not this book should be included in the Bible. And I don't know how exactly atheists use this book in support of their views. But having re-read this entire book in preparation for this sermon, it seemed to me that Ecclesiastes may be one of the boldest books in the Bible. It is bold

because it is open and honest and unflinching in naming and describing the absurdities of our world and life – everything under the sun.

Think about the absurdities of our time. It is absurd that children disappear playing in their front yards or walking home from school. It is absurd that homes are broken into and the people inside killed. It is absurd that people are killed just driving over a bridge on their way home from work. What about the absurdities you have personally experienced at work, at school, at church, in the community, in the world?

Such vanity of vanities have a way of making us wonder – are you there God? Do you care God? Where are you? Have you left us on our own? Why do you allow these absurd things to happen in our world and in our lives?

The fact that the Book of Ecclesiastes is in our Bible tells me that God is not unconcerned or absent. God does very much care for and love you and me and has not left us on our own. The absurdities we experience in our life are not something that God cannot understand or relate to, but in fact, God knows them well, so well that they are a part of the Word of God, the Holy Bible. Ecclesiastes is a book that assures us that even in the midst of the vanity of vanities of life, we have a God we can turn to who will understand and can relate to what we are talking about when we pour out our hearts to Him in those times of pain. And that's the place where healing can begin.

Ecclesiastes does not attempt to explain away the absurdities or give some reason why God would allow them to happen. This is another reason why this may be one of the boldest books in the Bible. It affirms that God is God of every thing, everyone, every time, everyplace under the sun. What God is up to in the midst of the absurdities is something of a mystery because our wisdom cannot comprehend the wisdom of God.

The Teacher ends chapter 8 and begins 9 with these words: “When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one’s eyes see sleep neither day nor night, then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out. All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.”

Our lives are not controlled by the vanities of life, but are in the hand of God. If the beginning of healing comes from pouring our hearts out to God, knowing that God knows about and can relate to the absurdities of our life, then the completion of that healing comes through Jesus Christ. You see, he suffered through the vanity of vanities. He came to bring God’s love and peace, healing and forgiveness and life, and yet he was put to death by the very people he came to save. But this too was in the hands of God and he raised Christ to life and conquered once and for all death and the power of sin and absurdity.

We come this morning to our Lord’s Table, standing and kneeling in awe before God. We extend our hands to receive Christ’s body and blood, the food and drink that our Lord so wants us to enjoy. In this meal, in this bread and drink of everlasting life, God truly gives to us what we need to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live. God gives to us Jesus Christ, the one who suffered through and conquered the vanity of vanities, and as we receive him at our Lord’s Table, we receive the one who will walk with us and lead us through the absurdities of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.