

St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
Creation Series 6, and Transfiguration Sunday  
February 19, 2012  
2 Kings 2:1-12; Eccl. 8:1-13; 2 Cor. 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Ecclesiastes and the Gift of Simplicity

If you've been following our exploration into creation stories, you've seen that the Bible has many things to say about creation, that no one story tells it all. Nothing points out the dramatic differences more than today's reading from Ecclesiastes. We have talked about the blessedness and goodness of creation in Genesis 1; the joy of Woman Wisdom and the Cosmic Dance in Proverbs; Second Isaiah and the God who is making all things new; and God's delight in the wildness of earth's creatures in the Book of Job. Today we look at Ecclesiastes, for whom "there is nothing new under the sun."

Ecclesiastes has been called "the most unconventional perspective on creation in the Bible."<sup>i</sup> It contains the teachings of one identified by the unique Hebrew name of *Kohelet*, which means something like "one who gathers an assembly"<sup>ii</sup> (The New Revised Standard Version uses "teacher," but it's an imperfect translation). When we read someone's writing, it is always helpful to know who they understood their audience to be, and it is likely that Kohelet was addressing himself as a teacher to young, educated men with "good prospects," the next generation of movers and shakers. And shake them up he does.

We read the most familiar of passages from Ecclesiastes, in fact one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. But let me give you another example of what our Teacher Kohelet has to say, from Chapter 1 --

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity ...  
All things are wearisome –  
One cannot express it.  
The eye is unsatisfied with seeing,  
And the ear does not get filled from listening.  
What has been, that is what will be;  
And what has been done, that is what will be done.  
There is nothing at all new under the sun.  
There is a phenomenon of which someone says,  
"See this, it's new!"  
It has already been for ages,  
Those that were before us.

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity..." I kind of like William Brown's take "vapor of vapors, all is flatulence."<sup>iii</sup> (!) It amounts to the same thing, something that is insubstantial, even noxious.

Is this just a viewpoint of one very depressed, world-weary and cynical person, or is there some wisdom here? What's it doing in our canon?

Speaking to his group of young men, students, the teacher seems to want to blast away any pretensions they might have to their own uniqueness, their expectations of lasting achievement. He reminds them they are but dust. Like the Book of Job, humility is the basis of his teaching. He asks "what is enduring?" Wisdom is better than folly, yet the wise and the fools face the same fate in death. Possessions we can't take with us. We can pass on our goods, our achievements, but those who come after us may not deserve them and may squander them. So don't aim for immortality. Don't start posing for the statue you hope they'll erect to you in the town square. The Teacher points out the cycles of nature, and of life: you're born, you live, you'll die. It's not about sin, this all didn't come about because of "The Fall" or any other human failing. It's just inevitable. We are just a part of the web of life. One of my favorite rock groups could be quoting this teacher: "sometimes you're the windshield, sometimes you're the bug." That's our *Kohelet*.

But there is more here. Thankfully, the teacher doesn't drop us down a well of bleak nothingness and leave us there. Ecclesiastes 8:15 says "So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun." The Teacher says this repeatedly. Pleasure seeking and living for the moment! Well, not quite. The teacher would be better understood as urging us to "receive the gifts of God"<sup>iv</sup> that are evident all around us. This is essential gratitude to God who is the author and source of every good gift. "We practice the core religious virtue of humility by noting with pleasure, day by day, the gifts that come to us from God. And the truth is, most of those are given so regularly that we never even pause to recognize them for the gifts they are."<sup>v</sup>

Many of us experience the wisdom of this. I've heard many times, when someone is asked how they are coping with a deep loss or tragedy, "I've learned to take pleasure in the small things in life." When I've been forced to give up things, things I can no longer do, I find I can be happy with less. The first half of life is often about accumulating – degrees, financial security, furniture, reputation and a place in society. That's important, even necessary. In the second half of life, spiritual growth happens in part by the process of letting things go, and discovering – to your surprise – that you no longer need them, or at least not the way you might have thought you did. You don't need them to define who you are. And the teacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us to strive to live simply. This simplifying we now know is an ecological necessity. When did we become a nation of storage facilities? When did the malls become our houses of worship? What deep hunger is trying to be filled with more stuff? That question is the beginning of a deepening of faith.

So we have these two notions: the teacher's insistence on enjoyment, and the pronouncement that runs throughout the whole book, "vanity of vanities." "Vanity" might be better understood as "absurdity" – the appalling disparity, the gaping chasm

between what should be and what is. The Teacher expresses the reality that if we make the purpose of our lives our own achievement, our own immortality, our own gain, we have, in the end, nothing.

And this brings us to the Gospel, the transfiguration. Because, what the Teacher of Ecclesiastes has to teach us is important, but it is not sufficient. Kohelet falls short of a gospel faith. One might see Ecclesiastes as preparing the way for Christ, that it leads us to the door but doesn't go through it. Learning, day-by-day, to live life as a pure gift, we gradually prepare ourselves to receive the gift of Godself, given to us in Christ. Because God gives us gifts not so that we simply keep them and take satisfaction from them, but that we see through the gifts to Godself, and that we may receive the gift of God's very self.

Looking at the Gospel, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes may give us a new perspective on the Transfiguration. Like Peter, we too might be tempted to be dazzled by the ethereal vision of Jesus in white, Elijah and Moses at his side. We too, might want to stay in the rarified oxygen of the spiritual, and not have to get earthly, get real, and see things as they are. But the text reminds us that after their vision on the top of the mountain, *Jesus comes back down again*. Down to the nitty-gritty. Down into religious and political quarrels, which are never, it seems, far from us. Down into poverty and pain, polluted rivers and an unstable climate. Down to species extinction and high asthma rates. Down to problems in Europe and Syria. Down to the threat of Iranian nuclear weapons. Down to the unemployed and underemployed, down to mortgage foreclosures and financial struggles. Down and down, and into it all, Jesus comes.

This gets at the heart of the gospel, Mark's and, truth be told, that of the whole New Testament. As Paul sings in Philippians, "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:6-7). Jesus' downward movement from his rightful place in glory to embrace all of creation out of love is, in a very real sense, the essence the gospel.<sup>vi</sup>

This is not to dwell in the dark places of our lives, but to assure and remind ourselves that Jesus is already there. In the face of everything, even while he knocks the stuffing out of self-importance, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes reminds us that God is in all things. Our Gospel faith reminds us that Christ is present in, and redeems *all things*. In Jesus, God interacts with creation in "a most intimate, intense, and bodily way."<sup>vii</sup> Christ saves us not by removing us from this earth, but, coming down the mountain, he enables us to find the ways to live harmoniously with all life, to be attentive to daily living, to respect all life, and to live in gratitude.

God came to us in and through the Incarnate Son precisely to be with us and for us through thick and thin and through life and death -- indeed, God came in Jesus to be with us through death into new life. We are called to participate in and enjoy God's life as it is intended for all creation. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, (Oxford; NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177.

<sup>ii</sup> Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2001): 104.

<sup>iii</sup> Brown, 181.

<sup>iv</sup> Davis, 107.

<sup>v</sup> Davis, 108.

<sup>vi</sup> David Lose, Commentary on Mark 9:2-9, accessed on line at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>vii</sup> Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2006), 45.