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Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23  
Vanity Fair

T.S. Eliot poem's The Hollow Men begins,

*We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar*

*Shape without form, shade without color,  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;*

*Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
Remember us-if at all-not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men.*

This is how the teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes felt – stuffed yet hollow. And so, like the Greek philosophers who undertook a threefold quest for knowledge, virtue, and happiness, our author began his quest for meaning. This man, this author, is known to us only by his general title, Qohelet. Qohelet means something like the teacher of teachers, or maybe the preacher, or the royal sage, or the seeker of wisdom. He is sort of a nameless everyman, not a common man, but a man on a quest, a man of means, a man of intellectual acuity, a man of moral discernment, a man about the town.

Qohelet in his quest for meaning, first sought after wisdom from the scribes and the ancient texts and the culture at large. He sought wisdom in the pillared porticoes, in the public square, under the shadows of city gates; on the housetops under the stars. Yet he was left wanting.

Next in his quest for meaning he sought out happiness, so he filled his life with luxurious goods and lavish pleasures. He acquired houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, pools, cattle, silver and gold, servants of all kind and concubines. And after achieving worldly success and acquiring every material thing imaginable still he was left wanting.

Stuffed yet hollow. The teacher pursues wisdom and then the teacher pursues pleasure. The reward of his intellectual strivings and his uninhibited hedonism is unbounded disillusionment. Early in this book of twelve chapters do we hear his grand thesis statement, his great discovery, his royal truth – ‘All is vanity’.

Ecclesiastes signature word is *hebel*, translated in English as vanity, and the word occurs 38 times in this short book. Hebel, hebel, hebel, all is hebel. Hebel connotes something empty, futile, fleeting, or unsubstantial. The author lists everything that human beings strive for and seek meaning in and then declares it all hebel. His quest has been in vain.

Late in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, one of the great church thinkers and defenders of orthodoxy, Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “Like the animals who labor and sweat in a mill with their eyes blindfolded, we go about the mill of life always going through the same motions and always coming back to the same place again. I mean that round of hunger, satiety, going to bed, getting up, emptying ourselves and filling ourselves – one thing constantly follows the other, and we never stop going round in circles until we get out of the mill.” Qohelet, the teacher was in the mill, unable to liberate himself from the malaise of his life. He had not found wisdom, virtue, or happiness but what he had discovered was ‘vanity, vanity, everything is vanity.’

Clearly this guy is having a midlife crisis or something. And yet, this everyman asks the questions so many of us ask at times in our lives, why do I do the work I do, why did I acquire all of this stuff, why do I spend my time in these ways, what is the meaning of it all? We are stuffed but hollow.

It is largely a Western and quite a privileged problem – when we suffer under the burden of too much and yet not enough. Too much work to do yet not enough fire in our bellies. Too much food on the table but not enough sustenance to nourish our souls. Too many social obligations to fulfill but too few relationships of meaning. Too much news swirling around but not enough words we can trust. Stuffed but hollow. All is vanity.

The ‘teacher’ in Ecclesiastes does not actually come up with profound answers at the end of his book. He makes very little progress in his quest and the most he can actually say is that there is probably a God, and God probably wants us to enjoy life – eat, drink, and be merry. Ecclesiastes is where we get that expression, from Qohelet. Unfortunately, it seems like his conclusions do not get him much distance from his hollow and stuffed feelings.

The writer of Ecclesiastes in his conclusions sounds like a young, modern day, American – ‘yeah, there might be a God, and God probably wants me to enjoy my life. That’s my truth. That’s all I know.’ But let’s remember a few things about the teacher, Qohelet – first, he lived in a time when there was little teaching or understanding about the afterlife and so this life and its pleasures were sort of all there was to it. And second, Qohelet lived in a time before Jesus had come to walk this earth, and preach the gospel, and call us into lives of discipleship.

Ecclesiastes is possibly the latest writing in the Old Testament, with most scholars placing it in the third century BCE. The book reflects a cultural disorientation – a time when economic and religious certainties were fading away. The everyman cries for meaning we hear, the voice filled with both disillusionment of the past and uncertainty about the future. I hear them as a cry for meaning, a cry for truth, a cry for salvation – a cry for Jesus.

I read a report this week about the stuffed but hollow feeling of Millennials, which said that 30% of them reported that they always or often feel lonely. This is the highest percentage of all the generations surveyed. Comparatively only 20% of Generation X reported the same frequency of loneliness and only 15% of Baby Boomers. Social media and the Internet make connecting instantaneous and yet we are left wanting. There are too many ways to make friends and start relationships but too few people who matter in our lives. Vanity, vanity. All is vanity. We, like generations before us, are seeking. We are longing. We are striving. And Ecclesiastes does not solve our problems, give us the answers, or explain the age-old quest for meaning but Ecclesiastes prods us towards thinking about where we will find our meaning and our truth and our salvation.

Biblical scholar Plantinga Pauw tells us we must hold this book in tension with the teachings and witness of Jesus. Pauw writes, “The Christian believer does not need to accept the conclusions of this book. On the contrary, the Christian will need to question many of them, deny others, qualify and interpret them in the context of the whole revelation of life and faith.” The Christian has much more to go on, in light of God’s revelation in the person of Jesus, the true Teacher and font of divine wisdom.

Hear words from our teacher:

*“Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”*

*“I am the way and the truth and the life.”*

*“Trust in God, trust also in me.”*

*“Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest.”*

*“Whoever will drink of the water I give will never be thirsty again.”*

*“I am the bread of life.”*

Jesus is very decidedly telling us where to place trust, where to seek rest, where to find God. Jesus is unashamedly claiming to be the Way, Jesus is claiming to have Truth, Jesus is offering us Life. Qohelet did not have Jesus but we do. We have been given answers, we have been given access, we have been given God’s great gift of revelation. Jesus fills the hollow man. Jesus cleanses the stuffed man. Jesus offers a call to everyman.

The report about the Millennial’s loneliness is quite a worrying and condemning report when you stand back and look at it. Our young professionals, our rising stars, our recent graduates feel lonely and disillusioned, meanwhile more and more of them report little to no religious affiliation or faith identity? I worry about this because it is at the same time that this generation is rising into careers and having families and gaining responsibilities when the church’s presence, and

power, and voice have culturally waned. In many cases, the church is not there to provide answers, provide mission, provide foundation, or provide community. The church is not there to teach about Jesus. The church is not there to bridge the gap from 'vanity, vanity, all is vanity' to the Way and the Truth and the Life. And so then where do you turn when you are seeking? Yoga, rock climbing, home brewing – all fine and well as hobbies but to find meaning? To find identity? To find truth? I think not.

The church has many important reasons to exist – to teach common values of goodness and decency when few other places will do so, to support the least of these and reach out to those in need, to bring people together for friendship and enjoyment but most of all – of primary significance, the church exists to preach Jesus. The person of Jesus Christ is the answer to Qohelet's strivings. Is there a God? Yes. Are we supposed to eat, drink, and be merry? If possible. But there is more - we have been called into lives of service, lives of faithfulness, lives of purpose. We have been called to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ. All is vanity without this calling. Meaning is thrust upon our lives when they are entangled with faith in God and our understanding that we have been called into lives of discipleship.

There are many questions to be asked in this lifetime, by young and old alike – and all should be answered in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ for without him all is vanity. But with him, all is possible.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.