

“Chasing the Wind”

Liturgical Date: Proper 13 C

Primary Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1, 12-14; 2:18-26

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost is the Old Testament Lesson from Ecclesiastes Chapters 1 and 2. The title of today’s sermon is “Chasing the Wind”. GOD SHOWS US THROUGH KING SOLOMON THAT THE THINGS THAT WE PURSUE OF THE WORLD ARE VANITY COMPARED TO THE ETERNAL GIFTS OF GOD SO THAT WE MAY GAIN THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE.

So who’s up for it? Who am I am going to sign up for the adventure? What do you mean “for what”? Chasing the wind of course. This promises to be the mission of a lifetime, very satisfying, very rewarding. Who’s in? No takers? Come on, work with me people!

Of course you don’t won’t to sign up for a fool’s errand such as chasing the wind. That is because it can’t be caught. It just keeps going, and the thing is, kind of like the old adage about the dog chasing his tail, “what are going to do with it if you caught it?” Chasing the wind would as King Solomon says “vanity” or “meaningless”. “Chasing the wind” is used in verse 14 of chapter 1 to describe everything under the sun and repeated in verse 26 of chapter 2. The Hebrew phrase is a little difficult to translate exactly to English as the KJV says, “vexation of spirit”, ESV “striving after the wind”, Holman “pursuit of the wind”, and Good News Translation “catch the wind.” But I chose the title based on the NIV which says, “chasing” as this fits so well with the main point that Solomon is trying to make here: that people can spend so much time chasing the things of the

world which many tell them will make them happy, but still end up missing the only thing that really matters in the end.

People can spend a lot of time pursuing things. Monty Python and Indiana Jones went on quests to find the Holy Grail. Which even if someone found that someday, it does not have power in itself. I can remember being sent on a quest to find something when I was younger. As a new Boy Scout on my first camping trip with the Troop, we were cooking over the campfire and the wind kept blowing smoke in our faces. One of the older scouts said, "Hey kid we need you to go get the left-handed smoke shifter." I said, "What's that?" "It's this thing about so big that catches the smoke and moves it way from us campers." "OK, I'll go get it," I said. But I asked several of other groups at their fires and they kept sending me further out to find it. Eventually, after going out into the woods a little ways it began to dawn on me that there was no such thing as a left-handed smoke shifter. This was just a trick that they played on the new scouts. This was a "wild goose chase". I had been chasing the wind. Maybe you think I was being stupid, but remember people (adults) have spent a lot of time trying to find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the Fountain of Youth, the Seven Cities of Gold, and they still look for Bigfoot.

You see, people spend a lot of time pursuing things-real and imagined-that they think will bring them happiness and fulfillment if they find them. King Solomon is the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes and he wrote this book reflecting back on what he had learned in life. Remember that Solomon was King David's son and was in line for a great kingdom. God allowed Solomon to ask for whatever he wanted, and Solomon asks for wisdom. He had great success in the short term, building the temple and expanding the power and wealth of Israel. People traveled from far and near

to hear his advice and answers. But ultimately, Solomon wasted much of what he was given. He would marry multiple wives, and some of them would lead him astray. He ended up falling into and allowing the worship of false gods, idolatry, in Israel. So as an older man, he looks back on his life.

And at first glance, his conclusions in the book of Ecclesiastes seem pretty depressing, don't they? A phrase that we see over and over again in Ecclesiastes is "under the sun", which represents the world-essentially everything the world offers apart from God. And another word appears over and over again, 37 times in this 12 chapter book in fact, that is often connected to the phrase "under the sun". It is "vanity" or "meaningless". And Solomon doesn't waste anytime making his point. After he introduces himself in verse 1, we see the first verse of our Old Testament Reading for today, verse 2 of Ecclesiastes 1, "*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" The Hebrew word translated as "vanity" literally means "mere breath". So by repeating this it is meaning "breath after breath" in life being a repetitive loop of the same things, searching for meaning. As the saying (sanitized here) goes, "Same stuff, different day."

Solomon offers some other observations in our text as he goes on. It's all vanity. It's all meaningless. It's "unhappy business" (v13). He goes on in our selection from Chapter 2. You work hard out in the sun, gain some material things, but then what? You die and someone gets it. More vanity. More striving after the wind. So how about this ray of sunshine to begin this book from the wisest human that ever lived?

In world that screams for us to "grab life by the horns", "Go for the gusto", "go for it because you only live once", "Just do it", and "the one that dies with the most toys wins", this seems like a little bit of a "buzz kill" doesn't it? Who is this crotchety old guy anyway? Well, for starters he is

one who has lived it. He has “been there and done that”. He has had political power. Material wealth untold was his. Built the most admired building in the land. Beautiful women, fast chariots. But what had it brought him? Could any of these things bring lasting happiness? Most importantly, in the scheme of eternity did any of these things really matter?

Some of the things that he had were not bad in themselves, but since the fall everything pertaining to temporal things has been perverted so that it no longer serves the original purpose of God, but can become vain objects of sin. Food, work, possessions, even sex are not bad in themselves-but when they are taken outside of God’s boundaries and intentions there are consequences. The pursuit of temporal things as the end-game is idolatry. They are vanity. It is chasing the wind. You may have money, but chances are someone will always have more than you. You may have power, but there is almost always someone else with more of that too. No, Solomon is not trying to throw a wet blanket on the world’s party, but to warn them as one with experience that ultimately these things are not what it is all about. Paul Kretzmann wrote in his commentary, *“Christians may profit by the sad experiment which Solomon made without paying the high price the Jewish King had to pay for the wisdom so gained.”* So Solomon is penning these words, inspired by God Himself, as a great piece of advice-free of charge for us to learn from.

The Book of Ecclesiastes not only speaks about vanity, but also about God. Actually the word for God is used 40 times, even more than vanity. In verses 24-26 of Chapter 2 Solomon even lets us know that our toil can be a gift if we recognize that this is from God. All of the things that we have as blessings are from the hand of God. If you have no faith in the true God, then you have no hope of eternity. And in that case then this is world is all

you have that will be good. A pastor friend of mine wisely said, *“For the unsaved this world is the closest thing to heaven they will experience and for the Christian this world is the closest thing to hell they will experience.”*

Even for the person that seems to have it all going for them, they will suffer pain, hurt, and ultimately they will die. So in the final balance sheet for the non-believer everything they have gained on earth counts for nothing in an eternal sense. It is vanity. It is striving after the wind.

I don’t often quote from the Apocrypha because even though it has some useful things to say, it is not inspired Scripture. But I do want to share something from the one of the Apocryphal books called the Wisdom of Solomon today: *“For the hope of the ungodly is like dust that is blown away with the wind; like a thin frost that is driven away with the storm; like as the smoke which is dispersed here and there with a tempest, and it passeth away as the remembrance of a guest that tarried but a day.”* Notice that it specified that this pertains to the “ungodly”. For the believer, all is not vanity. There is meaning. There is no need to chase the wind.

Even with all “vanities under the sun” throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon brings his sage observations to a stirring close. If we fast-forward to the last two verses of the book, 12:13-14, we read this, *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”* God is not going to evaluate us on judgment day on the vain things and pleasures of the world. The prominence of your vocation, the size of your bank account, nor the square footage of your house will earn you any extra points. What matters is if we have been faithful to God and what He has commanded.

And the truth is that none of us can be faithful enough by our own power. God's standard is perfect holiness. Trying to be as holy as God by doing good works is impossible. You could do good all day and still be stained by sin. Trying to earn our way into heaven by works is simply more chasing of the wind. A fool's errand greater than any hunt for bigfoot or a left-handed smoke shifter. There is only one that can save us from vanity and meaninglessness, from the damning effects of sin. Speaking prophetically, Solomon offers a glimpse in verse 11 of Chapter 12 of this One, *"The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd."* This one shepherd is, of course, the Good Shepherd-Jesus Christ.

You may have noticed a common thread that runs through our Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel Readings assigned for today. A contrast is made in all three of these readings. For Solomon the vanity of everything under the sun is contrasted with as he says in 2:24-25, *"This also I saw from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"* Jesus answers a question about an inheritance with a parable in St. Luke 12:13-21. A rich man has so much stuff he can't store it any more? His solution? To build even bigger barns to "relax, eat, drink, and be merry." But God rightly calls him a fool as his soul will be required of him and these treasures will avail him nothing. Verse 21, *"So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."*

Finally, we see quite a contrast in Colossians 3. Verse 2, *"Set your minds on things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth."* And in verses 6 and 8 a list of sins are given, the fleshly desires of a fallen world. But for those that have faith in Christ, a new self (v10) has been put on. One that does not chase after the wind, but trusts in the eternal

provisions of God. In the perfection of Christ we have the answer, the escape from meaningless vanity. In His death and resurrection, the eternal things that matter have been secured: eternal life and salvation.

As we sang in our Hymn of the Day, it really does all depend on our possessing. What is our true trust in? Our earthly possessions, or in the forgiveness that we possess in Christ? Are we chasing after the wind? Or has the wind of God's Spirit filled us with faith? GOD SHOWS US THROUGH KING SOLOMON THAT THE THINGS THAT WE PURSUE OF THE WORLD ARE VANITY COMPARED TO THE ETERNAL GIFTS OF GOD SO THAT WE MAY GAIN THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE. I leave you with the first and last verse of that hymn (LSB 732 All Depends on Our Possessing):

All depends on our possessing
 God's abundant grace and blessing
 though all earthly wealth depart.
 They who trust with faith unshaken
 By their God are not forsaken
 And will keep a dauntless heart.

If my days on earth He lengthen,
 God my weary soul with strengthen:
 All my trust in Him I place.
 Earthly wealth is not abiding,
 Like a stream away is gliding;
 Safe I anchor in His grace.

Amen.