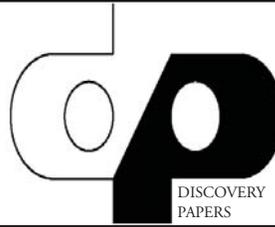


THE WAY OF BLESSING

SERIES: SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND



Catalog No. 100516
Ecclesiastes 1:1-18
Matthew 5:1-12
1st Message
Steve Zeisler
May 16 2010

Hans Christian Andersen's story, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, pokes fun at our insecurities. Everyone may agree to praise the invisible clothing of the King, but an ordinary boy who doesn't play along changes everything. Because we are prone to self-delusion, it's often the challenging voice, the outsider's voice that we most need to hear. With this in mind, consider the most unexpected text in the Bible.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-9, 12-15, 18

1 The words of the Searcher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Searcher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?

Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

12 I, the Searcher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

difficult to translate, but by any name he plays an important role. This Searcher is the boy in Andersen's story; the voice that says, "The King has no clothes." Ecclesiastes pulls back the facade and challenges conventional wisdom.

We are surrounded by unclothed emperors, aren't we? Bold calls to action based on "the assured results of scientific inquiry." Policy guided by "confident projections of esteemed economists." Assertive descriptions of "how things really are" by business leaders, fashion arbiters, politicians, even the loud certainties of sports talk radio. Joining this chorus are the self-designated god-talkers, religious authorities who claim that no-cost religious sentiment will lead to happiness, or that stridency and holiness are the same thing. Popular voices without content, dressed in nothing.

Consider a second voice that also rejects popular false claims. It is a voice that leads not to despair, as Koheleth's does, but to hope. Jesus' words at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:1-12a

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."

The Hebrew word Koheleth, rendered "Searcher" here, is

This sermon series will compare the words of two outsid-

ers who call for honesty in a world captivated by falsehoods. Koheleth challenges the foolish king, but leaves him naked and despairing. Jesus loves the one who is lost and offers to clothe him in righteousness.

Because it is so unexpected, we need to look carefully at the nature and purpose of Ecclesiastes. What makes it stand out?

First of all, it is unusual because it came into being as a written composition. This is a contrast to Psalms, for instance, which were first prayed orally and then written down. Narrative Bible passages tell of events that occurred before being recorded. Ecclesiastes, however, is the written insight of one who has thought long and hard about life. Like the parables of Jesus, it is profound and inspired without having to match any particular events in history.

Second, I'm convinced that Koheleth is a believer who adopts the role of seeker. He knows the promises of God, but having undertaken a literary constraint, he writes as if no revelation is available to him.

The key phrase is 'under the sun.' We see the sun rise in the morning and watch it circumvent the sky. Its movement draws a shell over the earth with God, uncommunicative, on the outside. Ecclesiastes is filled with references to God as creator and determiner of events, but Koheleth permits himself no awareness of divine intention. For the purposes of this book, God has not spoken promises. He has not made covenants. He has not given us any direction as to how we should be. We abide under the sun, with no word from God, required to draw conclusions from the world as it presents itself to us.

There is good advice to be found here at times (honest seekers can make helpful discoveries). I think we will find that occasionally Koheleth's faith is on display in spite of himself. But in general, he is going to try to play fair to the assignment. What is the human condition in a world where God exists but doesn't speak?

Koheleth begins with the heartbreaking conclusion to his inquiries. All is empty—nothing has meaning. Three patterns emerge which lead to this conclusion.

The first pattern is that nothing human lasts. Life is transient. Generations come and generations go. There were countless unremembered generations before ours and no one will remember us after we're gone. With no word from God to the contrary we must conclude that inanimate objects, mountains and rivers, endure and living things are discarded. The conclusion is painful, even outrageous, but human beings count for nothing.

When our kids were young we camped at the same lake four or five years in a row. Each summer we took pictures of our kids in front of the same rock. I was thinking about those pictures in this context. The rock doesn't care if our kids were there or not. I could offer to e-mail the rock a copy of a picture with the

kids standing in front. But it doesn't care, it has absolutely no opinion, no interest. It will be there centuries from now and my kids, who are terrific, will someday be gone. That's not right!

The second pattern that bothers Koheleth is that nothing changes. The cycles of nature go on and on...there is no direction, no meaning, no purpose...there is no plot to the story. There is no movement from good to evil or back again. The winds blow around the earth and years from now it will be the same. The earth spins and night follows day endlessly. Water evaporates and becomes a cloud, condenses, and rain falls in the mountains. The rain becomes a stream, the streams become a river, the river flows into the ocean, and the water evaporates again. Our strong intuition is that history should be headed somewhere and yet we discover no such thing. Everything is meaningless.

Thirdly, Koheleth says, "There is nothing I can do about it." Nothing lasts, nothing changes, nothing I can do.

Ecclesiastes 1:13

I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom, all that is done under the sun. I have seen all the things that are done under the sun, all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is twisted cannot be straightened, what is lacking cannot be counted.

This man—with brains, resources and determination—fails to find the purpose of life just like everyone before him.

I want to stop for a moment and ask you to think about some aspect of conventional wisdom that you once believed and found to fail. Perhaps the notion that life is fair. If you work hard and play by the rules you will be rewarded. Or the conviction that your friends and family will always be there for you. Or the belief that well intentioned people have healthy families and rewarding careers in predictable order. Can you identify some point in your life where the Emperor proved to have no clothes or where a promise proved untrue. If the memory remains painful, take some time and invite the Lord's healing.

Jesus stands with Koheleth in refusing pretense. He is not interested in polishing fake fronts. He, too, will ask hard questions and make bold assertions about what does not work. But he does so for a different reason. Jesus is the speech of God.

Ecclesiastes' "under the sun" is absent divine revelation. But we know better. From the beginning God has spoken of his heart and purpose...in creation, through angels, prophets, poets, in audible words, on stone tablets, promises uttered, covenants made, whispers of the Spirit. Supremely the voice of God is Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh. He is the new thing under the sun.

Koheleth is poor in spirit, mournful, filled with longing and therefore despairs. Jesus pronounces the same circumstances

to be the doorway to blessing. God does not reveal himself to those who believe in their own merit and capability. Discovering ourselves to be in great need, we do not sink in despair, but take the next step and discover the resources of God's love.

I mentioned the rock near Silver Lake. The day will come when its term will end and a new creation will supersede it. Koheleth was wrong. It is not inanimate objects that remain, rather it is the children of God who are eternal. The meek will inherit the earth.

Koheleth tried to 'figure things out' and said it was no use. Jesus declares that those who make peace, who pursue purity, who are willing to suffer for righteousness are making an eternal contribution. God sees and remembers and will honor the faith of his children. The alternative to imaginary clothing is not nakedness but robes of righteousness and armor for a battle worth fighting.

Leslie and I heard Carole King and James Taylor in concert last week, surrounded by people our age, remembering the music of the 60's and 70's when it was new. Koheleth's despair reminded me of the lyric of a Kris Kristofferson song, *Help Me Make It Through the Night*, from the same era.

*I don't care what is right or wrong
I won't try to understand
Let the devil take tomorrow
Lord, tonight I need a friend
Yesterday is dead and gone
And tomorrow's out of sight
And it's sad to be alone
Help me make it through the night*¹

The song is a seduction, but if it were a prayer, God would answer it. There are times when our despair is so deep we can't see beyond the night. God hears the cry for help, meets us in the dark and leads us to the light.

But Koheleth and Kristofferson, with lyrics of despair, do not have the final word. We need to be rescued but we were also created to care about what is right and wrong. We do want to understand. There can be joy in suffering if we know that we are being changed for the better, that God is bringing about a greater good and teaching us love for one another. If human existence has no meaning then even small difficulties make us angry or deflated. If God has spoken and we are loved then we enter into hardship and chaotic circumstances with hope. We don't need to understand life's mysteries if we are following the Lord of all.

We will conclude by singing a better song. Koheleth wrote of a world in which the speech of God is absent and the natural world consists of meaningless cycles. But for those who have ears to hear, the natural world declares the glory of God.

*This is my Father's world and to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings*

*The music of the spheres
This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas
His hand the wonders wrought*

*This is my Father's world
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong
God is the ruler yet
This is my Father's world
Why should my heart be sad
The Lord is King
Let heaven ring
God reigns, let earth be glad*²

Prayer, led by Charissa Shull

Steve has challenged us to remember that the promises of the world are empty, that they are hopeless. If you think beyond the surface level they are meaningless. Jesus provides us with the alternative worldview in his sermon, and particularly in what we call The Beatitudes (Matthew 5). Please pray thoughtfully, as individuals and as a community, in light of these verses.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Lord God, help us to accept our brokenness, emptiness, and utter need for You. Enable us to reject the pride of the world and, by Your grace, to make wise choices, that we may grow in humility towards You. "God have mercy on us, for we are sinners."

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Lord, help us to find safety in You as we embrace our vulnerability, humanity, and limits. Give us grace not to pretend, lie, or deny the pain of life, thus avoiding both reality and You. May we pay attention to the loss and grief around us, and be willing to wait for You in what often appears to be a hopeless, confusing, and pain-filled world. We place our hope in You, O Lord, and in Your unfailing love.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Lord, grant us grace to wait on You. You know our tendency to get angry, frustrated, and impatient with others, ourselves, and our circumstances. All of us crave control in one way or another. Almighty God, help us to drop our defenses and be approachable, kind, merciful, and also bold—with each other and with the world around us. Our souls wait for You, and in Your word we put our hope (Ps. 130:5).

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Lord, may we seek You above all else, for "Your love is better than life." Keep us from making choices out of an attempt to

satisfy our deep hunger for You with lesser things. Enable us to persevere in faithfulness through any darkness or despair we encounter in our lives. Purge our souls of all polluted affections, habits, and rebellions. May your Spirit saturate our spirits, and may your deepest desires, longings, and dreams become ours. Fulfill Your will through our earthly lives today.

**Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.**

Lord, enable us to slow down and eliminate hurry, that we might remember You and the richness of Your mercy towards us. Today we offer You our hurts, anger, bitterness, and disappointments. Enable us to forgive as generously and consistently as You forgive us. Teach us how to righteously process any anger toward You, others, and ourselves. We wait on You and trust in You, Lord. Show us the way of Your wisdom and love.

**Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.**

Lord, we ask You today for pure, clean, and uncluttered hearts. We long to see You. Lord, show us what to cut out of our lives, so we will have time and energy to reflect on our hearts before You. Cleanse our hearts of gluttony, lust, greed, sinful anger, impatience, self-pity, laziness, competitiveness, and pride. May we surrender to Your will this day, remembering Your loyal love. Let Your love soften our wills and transform us to follow Your leading and presence in every decision we make.

**Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.**

Lord, help us to follow Jesus in bringing true peace to the world around us. Deliver us from living in a false peace by avoiding conflict and appeasing others out of fear. Give us courage to disrupt false peace around us when needed. Fill us with the love and humility of Jesus as we step out in faith to do this. Give us wisdom and prudence to discern how to proceed. Finally, grant us the inner authority, the clarity, and the grace to persevere as we follow You in being true peacemakers.

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

Lord, You say true peacemaking will lead, at times, to rejection by the world. Fill us with courage to speak and live the truth—even when it is not popular or convenient. We choose the narrow road of: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst for You, mercy, purity of heart, and true peacemaking. Help us, Lord, not to love the world or anything in it, that we may love You alone with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength.

Amen.

NOTES:

¹*Help Me Make It Through the Night*. Kris Kristofferson © 1970, Monument Music. All Rights Reserved.

²*This Is My Father's World*. CCLI Song No. 84733 © Public Domain. Franklin Lawrence Sheppard / Mary Crawford Babcock. Additional ending: CCLI Song No. 1763929 © 1982 Triune Music, Inc. (a div. of the Lorenz Corporation) Jack Noble White / Maltbie Davenport Babcock. All rights Reserved. www.songtouch.com CCLI License No. 44292