

The Search for Meaning: Chasing After the Wind

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Pullman, WA
June 26, 2022

The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because we haven't the courage to live with uncertainty.
—William Sloane Coffin

Ancient Witness: Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

Today we will begin a brief series of sermons based upon the Book of Ecclesiastes. “Ecclesiastes,” or its Hebrew counterpart, *Qoheleth*, is often translated as “Preacher” or “Teacher,” but it literally means, “one who calls people together.” (*Ecclesia* is the Greek word that we get the English word, “church,” meaning “gathering of people.”) The writing of this book has often been attributed to Solomon, but scholars almost unanimously think that this was not the case. So the real author is unknown to us.

The basic thrust of the whole book can be found in the familiar second verse: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” Another translation is, “Life is useless, all useless.” Other translations read, “All is vapor”; “All is breath”; “All is futility.” All of our work and striving just vanishes into the air like a mist.

Ecclesiastes, probably writing late in his life, is writing about his search for meaning in life. “What is it all worth?” he seems to be asking. “You work and toil to make a difference, and nothing lasts. It’s like a vapor. It’s like *chasing after the wind*.”

If you detect a strong sense of cynicism here, you are right. Ecclesiastes has tried everything that society holds as valuable and precious and has found each one of them lacking. Each one has been a dead end. None has led to true fulfillment.

A Hasidic story tells of a man who went for a walk in the forest and got lost. He wandered around for hours trying to find his way back to town, trying one path after another, but none of them led out. Then abruptly he came across another hiker walking through the forest. He cried out, “Thank God for another human being. Can you show me the way back to town?” The other man replied, “No, I’m lost too. But we can help each other in this way. We can tell each other which paths we have already tried and been disappointed in. That will help us find the one that leads out. (from *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, Harold Kushner)

This is a little like the story of Ecclesiastes. Meeting him is like meeting that other hiker in the woods. In his effort to find real meaning in his life, he has tried many paths which have led to disappointment and frustration, bitterness and futility. Yet hearing the paths he has already tried can help us in our own search for that path which will carry us to completeness and wholeness. We are all travelers on that path. In Acts it says, “God made all people... that they should seek

God, in the hope that they might feel after God, who is not far from each one of us.” (17:27)
We are fellow seekers, fellow feelers for God, by virtue of being human. It’s what we do.

I have met many people who have echoed the words of Ecclesiastes. “I’ve given up on politics. The system is too corrupt. We try to get some things accomplished for the good of society, but it’s two steps forward and two steps back.” Or, “I’ve given up on the church. Every time I start to feel good about being part of it, I’m disappointed by a minister or a priest or another member.” Or, “I don’t understand it. The harder I work, the more miserable I am. My family is falling apart, my health is failing...”

“All is futility,” said Ecclesiastes. “And,” he said, “I ought to know. I’ve tried it all.”

First, he tried a life of wealth and pleasure. In chapter two he wrote, “I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all manner of fruit trees... I have male and female servants, and great herds and flocks, more than anyone else before me. I gathered for myself silver and gold, the treasures of kings and provinces.”

He seems to be having everything his way. What more could he ever want? Yet for some reason, he continues to feel that there is still something missing in his life. There is a dead end to “looking out for number one.” Big houses, new cars, second homes, traveling the world... To have the ultimate goal in life as winning means that we must view everyone else as a competitor and as a threat. And we are set at odds with others and separated from other people. Ecclesiastes saw this and called it futility.

Harold Kushner said, “You don’t become happy by pursuing happiness. You become happy by living a life that *means something*. The happiest people you know are probably not the richest or most famous, probably not the ones who work hardest at being happy by reading the articles and buying the books and latching on to the latest fads. I suspect that the happiest people you know are the ones who work at being kind, hopeful, and reliable, and happiness sneaks into their lives while they are busy doing those things. You don’t become happy by pursuing happiness. *It is always a by-product, never the primary goal.*” As George Orwell said, “People can only be happy when they do not assume the object of life is happiness.”

So after he found emptiness in a life of pleasure, he turned to wisdom. “So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly... They I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness.”

Yet, knowledge and intelligence alone is a dead end. The most cultured nation in Europe brought on the Holocaust. The most brilliant minds gave us the nuclear threat. The most creative and inventive scientists have led us to a way of life which is spoiling our air and our drinking water and is killing the planet. What good is the genius of medical technology if it is denied to so many? Or if it is attainable, it is unaffordable, causing bankruptcy and destitution for so many others? What good is the best knowledge if it is driven by simply by greed and profit? Education and learning alone is not the key to life. Understanding without sensitivity

and compassion leads to cruelty, destruction and despair. Knowledge is like a rudderless ship; only meaning can provide direction and chart the course.

True wisdom means *knowing the limits* of human intelligence and respecting the mystery which is beyond us. As Blaise Pascal put it, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not understand.”

Perhaps Ecclesiastes saw, as we have seen so often, smart people doing foolish, selfish things. And to seek the ultimate answers in reason and human intelligence is futility.

Finally, Ecclesiastes sought meaning in religion. Yet, even here, he runs into a dead end. Why? Well, I have seen the same thing myself. Someone is searching for meaning and perhaps starts going to church for the first time. Things go OK for awhile, but then the person runs into some conflict or situation where there is no clear, unambiguous answer, and then that person is gone. This is the problem of the “religion of the easy answers.”

This is the *kind of religion which discourages questions*. It is often authoritarian and harsh. “Quit asking, ‘Why?,’ just obey!” they might say. The “religion of the easy answers” might work for awhile. When we are children, there is something comfortable about someone taking care of us who has all the answers. They take care of us and tell us what to do. Yet, as we move into adulthood, there is something about this religion which leaves us with an emptiness.

It is in this context that Ecclesiastes said, “Be not overeager to go to the House of God... Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God.” *True religion calls upon us to grow, to search*. The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. And Ecclesiastes found that a faith with too much certainty is a dead end. Again, Kushner says it so well: “For responsible religious adults, God is not the authority telling them what to do. God is the divine power urging them to grow, to reach, to dare... Authentic religions does not want obedient people. It wants authentic people, people with integrity.”

Religion itself cannot provide ultimate meaning—only God can do that. Religion can only point to it; it cannot provide it. Abraham Heschel once said: “We have learned to listen to every ‘I’ except the ‘I’ of God.” Instead of pointing to the “I” of God, religion can become just another “I” that we listen to among many.

And so this is something that we can learn from Ecclesiastes—the sense of futility can be a good thing. *If the fear or awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then the experience of utter frustration and futility can be the beginning of a truer faith*. As William Sloane Coffin so aptly put it, “The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because we haven’t the courage to live with uncertainty.”

Holocaust survivor and therapist, Victor Frankl, wrote a classic book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In it he said that humanity’s search for meaning is a *primary force* in our lives; it is instinctive. When he was in a concentration camp, he consoled his friends by telling that “human life, under any circumstances never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning *includes* suffering and dying...” (p. 132)

“What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment. To put the question in general terms would be comparable to the question posed to the chess champion, ‘Tell me, master, what is the best move in the world?’ There is simply no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game...

“As each situation in life represents a challenge and presents a problem for a person to solve, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. Ultimately, people should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather must recognize that it is *she or he* who is asked. In a word, each person is questioned by life; and one can only answer to life by answering for one’s own life.” (p. 172)

And so, what we are looking for is found in the search itself. The meaning we seek is in the struggle, not when the struggle is over. Futility is the friend of faith, not its enemy. Someone was once asked that perennial question, “What is the meaning of life?” What followed is the best response I’ve heard: “And who’s asking?”

It is true that meaning in that ultimate, general sense eludes us, and we can no more capture it than we could catch the wind. Yet it is in the search itself that we encounter the Mystery that some of us call God in the living of our actual lives. As Paula D’Arcy said, “God comes to us disguised as our life.” And our lives call us to discover true meaning, to discover God, in every moment.