

Sermon: Year C, Proper 13

Texts: Ecclesiastes 1

Colossians 1

Luke

This past week my wife Trish and I were able to get away for a few days of vacation on the coast of Maine. Before I left, John Talbott kindly volunteered to cover the task of preaching for me, so that I could truly leave my obligations behind. Somewhat blithely, I assured him, then, that I didn't think that preaching this morning would be an overbearing duty. So before heading off, I read through the texts appointed for today, figuring that the time away would offer me ample opportunity to ruminate on them at my leisure.

The pleasure and risk of reading, of course, is that texts reframe the way we look at life, and, just so, too, experiences reframe the way we read texts. I'm not sure that I'd recommend to everyone that they take the book of Ecclesiastes with them for a vacation on the shore. It's not exactly conducive to relaxation. But it is piercingly insightful, and what I feel I need to say this morning stems directly from the strange confluence of thinking Ecclesiastes while in Bar Harbor at high season.

On Tuesday afternoon, when Trish and I arrived there and turned up Main Street, both sides of the road were teeming with pedestrians. It's a ritual that occurs every summer in every seaside town that seeks the tourist trade. From morning until late evening people wander, up and down, block after block, stopping and turning only when the bright lights and merchants' signs come to an end. All the movement is a bit awkward. Groups stand in circles on sidewalks, wondering out loud what to do next. Parents negotiate with children, suddenly halting to talk about who's tired, who's hot, who's hungry, and which of the profusion of ice cream vendors is best. Residents try to weave their way quickly among the crowds. Tourists meander and pause... meander and pause... staring with blank looks into the brightly lit windows of shops selling local artifacts, souvenirs inscribed with witty quips, and a voluminous supply of T-Shirts, many emblazoned with rude quotations.

It's the perfection of human grazing. We are free to roam, and the trick of roaming is to be serially enticed without ever feeling the press of responsibility or true consequence. The luxury is that nothing really matters – not the amount eaten or drunk, nor the purpose of any item bought, nor the offensiveness or banality of the messages people display on their chests. The time spent, the things purchased, the very use of language itself: it's all carefree – or, one might interject, careless, for almost everything seems to be immersed in a thick fog of casual indirection. To use the term given us from Ecclesiastes, all is vanity. This colorful jumble of persons and things may be attractive or exciting or fashionably lurid or slyly crude, but, ultimately, it suffers from, and may impose a sense of, encroaching emptiness – chasing after wind.

The word used by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes – “hebel” in Hebrew, translated as vanity – is not meant to be derogatory. It doesn't imply depravity. The Preacher is a skilled observer, and even in so short a book, he notes much in the world that is delightful and beautiful. He speaks of things that give nearly unutterable joy and carefully measures up the impressive accomplishments of humankind. This is not the work of a pessimist. But the term “hebel” most directly suggests vapor or smoke or, yes, fog, and it is repeatedly used to describe, in instance after instance, how even the things we most rely on as steady and firm can suddenly dematerialize and turn to mist. What we take as real often shows itself to be illusory. What we expect will be successful, frequently comes to nothing. In every direction, at every level, all the toil of the world, says the Preacher, finally *guarantees* nothing. Resources, consumed, become scarce. Saved assets can be devalued with surprising quickness. Many friendships mysteriously wane. Children grow into their own independence, which can be more

independent than parents ever dreamed. Permanence is hard to find. There is reason for happiness; but it is fleeting. There are times of contentedness and satisfaction; but they are temporary and irregular. Nothing sticks. Nothing endures. With repeated and increasing conviction, the Preacher concludes that everything is “hebel”: no matter how dazzling, it is still transitory, it is still disposable, destined for obsolescence, just one more exhibit of pop reality. To borrow a bit from the Gospel lesson – no matter how big your barn, no matter how full it is, no matter what you put in it, your barn can not guarantee your life. If you spend your life building barns for yourself, then you are a fool. You have trusted in hebel, something that, inevitably, will fail you. This is what it means to live “under the sun.”

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Jacques Ellul began with a single and powerfully succinct statement. He wrote: “Any study on vanity must be placed under the heading of Georges Bernanos’ words: ‘In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that [does] deceive.’ This, said Ellul, is the whole message of Ecclesiastes. It is a book of unrelenting unmasking, showing in case after case all the places where hope, misplaced, fails. It’s a dangerous little text. That’s why it’s largely left unread. Few of us have the stomach for its austerity. We prefer the haze of a thousand superficial enjoyments – immersed in a parade of trinkets – for hope can die a thousand small deaths if we believe, as well, that it will continue to spring eternal.

And yet, we have also heard this morning, along with Ecclesiastes, a text from Saint Paul, which is the perfect complement to the Preacher’s unblinking reduction. His work was the breaking down of all false hope, which is legion, but Paul’s work, especially in his letter to the Colossians, was identifying the one hope that remains and endures, the one hope that is decisive and true and, having died, has conclusively defeated all death in resurrection.

Somewhere amid all the ice cream and jewelry and the cute coffee mugs exclaiming “Ba Haba,” I found myself yearning for words that were stronger, that provided a place where I could put my feet down solidly, words that announced a purpose and put an end to roaming indifferently and unattached. I wanted a hope that, once sprung, would blossom, not die, and a sense of wisdom that was expansive, not just odd or idiosyncratic or comically cynical. With his typical audacity, Paul named this in one simple phrase: “Christ,” he says, “is all and in all.”

This is a statement without exception. It encompasses everything. And, just so, it’s a claim that is full of grace because this hope deceives no one, and it refuses no one. It is here, in Jesus, that God has accomplished God’s own purpose, which, plainly said, is this singular end: it is the binding together of all things, of all persons, of all time, in one perfect harmony. There is in this hope no mere wandering, no dabbling. Paul refers to it as stripping off the entire old self and putting on the clothing of a whole new and different identity. “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free,” he declared. These distinctions do not hold. They are all hebel, vanity, vapor. And so too are all the distinctions that so exercise us in our own time and falsely limit the love of God – the labels and claims that repeatedly divide us against ourselves. Paul leaves no room for exclusion of any kind. As William Stringfellow aptly noted: “Jesus Christ means that God cares extremely, decisively, inclusively, immediately for the ordinary, transient, proud, wonderful, besetting, profane, frivolous, heroic, lusty things of humankind. The reconciliation of God and the world in Jesus Christ means that in Christ there is a radical and integral relationship of all persons and all things. In him all things are held together.” Here Ecclesiastes is met by its effective counterpoint.

The marvelous revelation then announced by Paul, which follows directly, is that vanity disappears in three primary practices: in offering forgiveness, in giving thanks, and by dwelling in peace. By these three habits, reconciliation occurs. By these three, redemption

can be achieved. By these three, the love of Christ is made real in us. By these, hope is made incarnate, solid, and true. And if our Christianity is to be anything other than hobby, other than hebel, then these three must be our constant witness. We have not been left to merely roam about; our calling is to spend our time and our life naming with acuity this certain hope that God has so passionately secured.

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