

"Nothing New"

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Our text this morning comes from the book of Ecclesiastes where we'll be reading and studying all of chapter 1. I really feel as though, of all the poetical books in the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes is the most maligned and misunderstood. For one thing, we don't really know who wrote it. The traditional view is that Solomon wrote the book later on in life as a reflection piece but that's not certain and, honestly, it doesn't need to be. More problematic, however, is that many see it as the brooding, depressing version of Proverbs; a bleak picture of the world that might appeal to a moody teenager more than a wise adult. Perhaps some of that reputation is earned but, as we'll see, it's a misjudgment. There is much in Ecclesiastes that speaks of the harsh realities of life and existence but there is also hope. As we approach our text, keep in mind the big questions of life. Why we're here, why we do the things we do, what actually matters, where meaning is found.

The "New Year" season is possibly one of the most interesting to observe. Virtually 364 days out of the year we live lives of unconcerned and unconsidered action, moving almost mindlessly from one thing to the next. You wake up, go through your routine, tick the boxes of the everyday ritual, perhaps deal with the rare exception to the average, and end up closing the day only to wake up the next and begin the cycle again. So rarely do we consider anything more than what is immediately ahead of us. This day, however, stands out against that backdrop as one of the few days when we actually think about the long term and, in response, many will set resolutions for the coming year. Or, more likely, the coming month or two if things go well.

What if we began to look within more than just this one day each year? What if we took our eyes off the very next step, lifted them for a moment, and considered the big questions of life? In reality, we spend much of our time avoiding that very thing. We fill our lives with distractions, keep taking things step by mindless step, and ignore the fact that one day — perhaps sooner than we even know — we will die. But if we, even for a brief time, began to let those existential issues and the fear of emptiness encroach upon our comfortable day-to-day, we would likely find ourselves in another common place: seeking to find comfort and meaning in the world around us.

In a sense, that state is the prologue to the book of Ecclesiastes and our text today. After even an ounce of thought is given to issues of eternity, life and death, ultimate meaning

and purpose, the natural reaction of sinful man is to do everything within his or her power to craft a meaning or purpose in worldly things. One of the most common avenues is that of seeking meaning in one's work. Often the career, whatever it might be, is seen as the culmination of life. All of your education and preparation has led to this point: being a successful, contributing member of society. So the thought becomes that meaning and purpose can be found in the empire one builds. That empire doesn't merely need to be one built upon material wealth, it may be one of influence, acclaim, or stability. And this isn't even exclusive to those we might traditionally think of as being in the workforce. For those whose primary occupation is in caring for a family, the end product of that care can become the goal. Purpose then becomes the success of the child and from this very issue we see countless cases of parents living vicariously through their children, urging them in very specific directions to pursue particular careers or to become part of high circles in society. The point is, that no matter what we say we believe about eternity, God, and the other meaningful questions about life, it's far easier than we might think to buy into the idea that the basis of one's existence is found in how many people know your name, how much others love you, how many battles you've won and worlds you've conquered.

While the work path is common, it is by no means the only one. The pursuit of novelty is another path, one that might be even more prominent among younger generations. What I mean by "novelty" is the idea that your worth in the world is defined by being unique, breaking the mold, trying and making something new, an idea which can spin off in a variety of ways. At bottom, this is one of the primary reasons beneath the hundreds of possible identity labels by which one can be defined in popular culture. The traditional binary is so passe, all the cool kids are experimenting, finding the label that they perceive fits best. The urge for endless novelty goes further and wider, however. Social media as a phenomenon is really all about this very idea. To get views and clicks you've got to do something different, something new, something no one has done or thought of before. Yet, for each icon who has caught that lightning in a bottle and gone viral, gained a following, the other shoe is quick to drop. They have to keep reproducing novelty in order to stay relevant, in order to catch and hold our fleeting attention. This is only the tip of the iceberg; the path of finding meaning through novelty is wide.

A third path is one that might seem innocuous on the surface, that of learning or education. The conceit is that the world's problems are largely due to a lack of learning or education. In this scheme, the more one learns of other cultures, religions, and the world in general, the more one will find a deeper understanding, peace with others, and general satisfaction. The world asks, what could be the answer to bigotry? To war? To suicide? To school shootings? To racism? To political divisiveness? Education. So we pile up facts and worldly wisdom in the pursuit of this ideal: enlightenment. As I'm sure you can tell, this path, the path of learning, is much like the two paths before described: it is wide and it is full.

You may be wondering, why haven't you touched Ecclesiastes 1 yet? What does all this have to do with our text? The answers are, that's what we're about to do and it has everything to do with our passage. You understand, each path so far discussed, each one (and there are many) that seeks to find meaning in a fallen world outside of the redemption of Christ, or "under the sun," leads to one place: emptiness. That's the epiphany the author of Ecclesiastes has reached. He approaches as one who has climbed the mountain of achievement and worldly meaning, reached the top, and is now descending the heights to warn all the climbers coming up after him that the prize at the top of all this achievement and truth-seeking is a whole pot of nothing. He says it's all "vanity of vanities." Very literally, the word "vanity" here used could be translated "vapor" or "mist." Later he will elaborate on what he means by saying that following these paths to their end and expecting to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is like "a striving after wind," trying to catch a puff of smoke in one's hands. It's impossible, he says. There is no proverbial pot of gold to be found at the end of these rainbows. Rather, he says, there is only sorrow, dissatisfaction, and a hollow fear that everything upon which we've built our existence might just be a lie.

He says of the path of work that it is vain, empty, fleeting and ultimately meaningless. He calls it "toil" in verse 3 which evokes more than just the sweat-of-your-brow image that "work" might. Toil is hard, incessant, exhausting and so, he says, is the idea that one might find meaning in work, acclaim, empire-building. He likens this pursuit to the endless cycles of nature, the rising and setting sun, the blowing of the wind, and the streams that run to the sea. Notice how he describes these natural elements. The sun *hastens*. The wind blows *around and around* on its circuits. The streams of water *run* to the sea. Always working, laboring, toiling, and what becomes of it? Nothing lasting, because every day the sun has to rise again. Every day the wind blows. Every day the streams keep on flowing. Never stopping, never ceasing, never resting. Should we be surprised by this, the reality that attempting to find meaning in work is empty and void? After all, a curse was laid upon all toil in Genesis 3, after our first parents sinned. The Lord God spoke to Adam and said, "cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." No matter how hard you work, how many hours you spend building your kingdom, how many people you influence and win to yourself, how high you climb this ladder, it is a pursuit doomed to fail.

But what of novelty? Well, the writer tips his hat to it right in verse 4: "a generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever." He picks this up as a natural stepping stone in verses 9 and following. Another way of putting it might be that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Even further, he makes it plain that even our greatest achievements, those moments when we actually achieve something that people

might remember and that we think might stick and last, it never lasts forever. Of the billions of people who have ever lived, almost every single one is no more than a mere footnote in the grand scope of things and even the exceptions will one day fade into merely a hollow bust, a personless ghost of events recounted again and again until they seem to lose all meaning. We know this almost instinctually, that very little that is done will ever live past us by even a year or two, so why do we chase this idea of novelty? Like the path of toil and striving this path is wide, full, and ultimately meaningless.

Finally, what about learning? Surely, of all three, this might seem the most promising. But once again, the writer speaks plainly in verses 16-18: “in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” While the immediate advantages and virtues of worldly learning and wisdom are plain, the end result will always fall short of the goal and, for the individual, the reality is that a deeper understanding of people, culture, and the world will only lead to a deeper sorrow. Properly understood and framed, education and learning — outside of the redeeming work of Christ — can only lend one a clearer picture of the problem. In the end, every path of meaning pursued in this “under the sun” perspective— with no view of Christ and redemption — will lead, in the best case, to fleeting joys and, in the worst case, to a bitter sorrow and hopelessness.

But is that all? Is the darkness all there is to be found? It’s a valid question to ask because, more so than in previous years, nihilism has somewhat come into fashion. Nihilism, as you may know, is the idea that everything really does mean nothing, that there is no real purpose or meaning to be found in the world around us. In reality, it’s the natural and logical conclusion of a totally secular worldview. If I’m nothing more than a random collection of atoms and reactions who happens to have temporary, perceived sentience, but will one day utterly cease to exist and whose atoms will turn back into the endless cycle of life, why care about the everyday? Why seek something so foolish as ultimate or transcendent meaning? It’s all pointless anyway, right?

While nihilism is, in some circles, enjoying a day in the sun, the truth is that this answer is a false answer in part because it’s not what anyone actually wants. You can say that everything means nothing but I’m pretty sure it’ll be meaningful if I decide to steal your credit card information. You can say that everything means nothing but I’m quite sure that you’re going to wake up tomorrow and in some way invest in something that you hope will give you satisfaction or will otherwise last beyond your memory. The emptiness of the secular worldview might seem attractive for a moment, but no one can live there. Why? Because we’re made to yearn for more. Last week, Gerrit spoke of *hiraeth*, the home-calling urge for belonging and love that seems to slip away like smoke as the years roll on. As he told us, God imprinted in us a desire for home and that desire is meant to point us toward Him. Similarly, the Lord has imprinted on each of us an inherent desire to be part of something bigger, to establish something that is beyond our mere selves. We know that our lives — both

collectively and individually — matter! It's the question of how we get to that meaning that contains the problem.

*"I thought the writer said that life is one big 'unhappy business,' that all is vanity,"* you might object. At face value, it might seem like the Preacher is advocating some form of nihilism, but this couldn't be much further from the truth. Finding ultimate meaning under the sun — that is, seeking purpose in only that which my hands can accomplish in a fallen world — is vain, empty, chasing after wind, but that's not the end. This is one of those rare situations where I have to spoil the end of the book to help us understand the beginning because, as the Preacher reaches the end of his musings, he summarizes the overall message in 12:13: "The end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." What the Preacher, inspired by God, is given a glimpse of here and is attempting to show us is that the only way meaning can be found in these things is through a fundamental shift in priorities and perspectives. Rather than putting our pursuits for meaning at the front and then seeking to find God in our journey, he says that you must fear God and follow him before going your own way. To put it another way, you have to understand what is beyond yourself before finding meaning rather than seeking meaning by creating something beyond yourself.

And what light the Preacher gives us here only makes sense — indeed, is fulfilled — by the Redeemer. One has to imagine that Christ had 12:13 in mind when he said, after encouraging us to be anxious for nothing, "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Christ is calling us in our foolish pursuits to not just lay them down but to utterly change the way we approach them because the truth of his coming changes everything. The eternal Son of God has entered into human existence, taking on flesh and frailty. He died to pay the price for the sins of his own and rising led a host of captives with him, conquering death itself. God reaching down to man and redeeming him from sin completely shatters every old paradigm and gives meaning to the everyday, menial stuff that once seemed empty and pointless. Christ's advent redeems your toil. As just part of his curse-breaking agenda, Christ has come to redeem your toil and striving because now all that you do is done in service to him. Only when we bow to Christ as Lord and master can we work with purpose. Why? Because our purpose is not in what we accomplish but in the God who has conquered. Christ's advent redeems the fact that nothing seems new under the sun because he has actually made — and will finally make — all things new. Christ's advent redeems the passage of time because the endless and seemingly aimless passage of years has an end: the day when Christ returns and time itself is undone. Christ's advent redeems knowledge and learning for all true learning and insight can only be found from learning at his feet. Christ's advent redeems and fulfills our innate desire to find meaning and purpose in something that lasts beyond us because he came to make his people part of his story of redemption, making every detail meaningful. Brothers and sisters, the list

goes on, so hear this. The world around us is tired and full of weariness. As you enter into this New Year, register that reality. Note the pain, the futility, the sorrow inherent to this existence. But when the pain of that reality begins to grip you, don't ignore it, don't distract yourself, don't plunge yourself neck-deep into pursuits you know will not satisfy. Instead, remember that all creation groans with bitter longing for its Redeemer, and he has come and is coming once more. That's what we commemorate at this table, so let's gather as a family and allow our priorities and perspectives to be utterly renewed and transfigured by this: that the body and blood of the risen Christ are ours by faith.