

“Chasing After Wind”
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, 14; 3:1-14
8th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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A number of years ago in *The Wall Street Journal*, there was an article that argued there REALLY IS such a thing as a mid-life crisis. That it’s not just a myth, or a make-believe way of describing the anxiety that some people experience in their 40s and 50s.

“Numerous studies have found that our happiness level through our lives follows a U-shape, with folks becoming increasingly dissatisfied as they approach their 40s and then bouncing back from there.”

And while common patterns emerge to try to fix things:

having kids will make us happy,
getting a pay raise will get us out of our funk—
there’s still a tendency for “spikes in happiness to fade” in
middle age.

HOWEVER, according to the studies, there is a silver lining.

Even if the dip in the U-shape is caused by something traumatic:
the death of a spouse,
getting a divorce,
the loss of a job...

“...adaptation comes to the rescue. Folks usually adjust to these setbacks—and within a few years their reported happiness often returns...”

“That U-shape is just so robust, across so many studies and across so many countries,” says one economics professor, *“You can’t get away from it...”*¹

In other words, according to this article,
there is a PATTERN to human life that stretches
across class and race and oceans and minds...

Now I doubt that the author of that article had Ecclesiastes in mind while he was writing...

But that universal PATTERN he talks about –
it sounds like it could’ve come straight out of our text.

*“For everything there is a season...
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance...”*

And you can almost hear the words:
a time for a mid-life crisis,
a time to be happy once again.

And yet what’s fascinating is that scholar after scholar has tried to UNCOVER the pattern in our verses for today, how it’s organized, why those particular actions and events are the ones that are chosen...and NO SATISFYING pattern or formula has ever been found with these words.

Despite the rhythmic quality of the text,
the GROUPING of the words
actually DEFIES definition,
it eludes order and a predictable pattern.

¹ “Rich, Successful—and Miserable: New Research Probes Mid-Life Angst,” by Jonathan Clements, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2005.

I vividly recall my Hebrew teacher in seminary saying THAT may be precisely the writer's point.²

Do you remember the first scripture passage that was read?
Chapter one begins like this:

“Vanity of vanities...all is vanity!”

It sounds depressing.
Like Ecclesiastes is a very melancholy book.
But the translation is misleading.

The Hebrew word that gets translated as vanity—
it really means VAPOR...MIST...AIR...
something we cannot hold onto,
something that defies our grasp.

Put another way, the author of Ecclesiastes—
while appearing to say that life is predictable and orderly,
a time for weeping and a time for laughing...
is actually saying the opposite.

That while we know these things will happen in life, life's events elude us. They are beyond our grasp, outside of our control.

Think about it:
“...a time to weep, a time to laugh...”

Have you ever tried to make yourself laugh?
Have you ever tried to cry on command?

Go ahead—on the count of three, everybody weep!

² Dr. Choon-Leong Seow was my Hebrew professor who also taught a class on Ecclesiastes. I am also indebted to his book in the Anchor Bible series, *Ecclesiastes*, New York: Doubleday, 1997, for the exegesis of these texts.

Now I see some of you laughing.
That just goes to show how little control I really have around
here...

Do you see the point?

How many of you like having control over your days?
How many of you really get excited when something unexpected
happens to you, and your day, or your week, or your life starts to spin
OUT OF CONTROL?

I wonder if any of you heard the story, it came out about 7 years
ago, the story of the two sets of identical twins in Bogota, Colombia?

Shortly after they were born, they were in same hospital, and
somehow, one boy from one set was SWITCHED with another boy from
the other set.

In other words, they were born identical twins, but because of the
mistake that someone in the hospital happened to make, each brother
grew up with a brother who was NOT originally his brother.

Each grew up thinking he was a fraternal twin.
And no one, not even their parents, knew what had happened.

So one boy, Carlos, lived in the city and grew up with Jorge, when
he should have grown up with his identical twin brother, Wilber, in the
country.

And another boy, William, grew up in the country, when he should
have grown up with his identical twin, Jorge, in the city.

No one knew anything about the accident that changed the course of these boys' lives until one day, in the summer of 2013, one of Jorge's co-workers, a young woman from his office named Laura, walked into a butcher shop.

She saw Jorge behind the counter and wondered—what the heck in Jorge doing moonlighting in a butcher shop on a Saturday? He works in my office!

She waved at her friend.

He barely acknowledged her.

Because of course, the person behind the counter wasn't Jorge, it was William.

Who had never met Laura!

When Laura went back to work on Monday and told Jorge she had met his exact double in a butcher shop, Jorge laughed...and he blew it off as a funny coincidence, even after he saw a photo of William. But through a series of texts and photo-sharing in the coming months, there came a day when Jorge was staring at a photo not just of this person (William) who looked exactly like him—but also at a person seated next to William, who looked like Jorge's brother, Carlos—only it wasn't Carlos, it was Carlos' biological brother, Wilber.

And the mistake, finally, became clear to all four young men.

What's remarkable is that after this, all four decided to meet, and over the course of time, they accepted what happened and became close.

But can you imagine what it would have been like to find out? Take William, for example.

He grew up in the country in a poor family, without the economic advantages that his biological brother Jorge received. His childhood home had no indoor plumbing, he missed years of schooling.

William loves his parents who raised him.

He loves Wilbur, the brother who was always with him.

But what might have happened to him, had the mistake never been made?³

What happens when your life gets turned upside down—
not because of anything you did or deserved...but because of
an accident, a chance occurrence, a random event...something beyond
your control?

I think THAT’S the question that Ecclesiastes wants us to address.

How does one live a life of wisdom, when the most important
events of our lives often escape our grasp and are beyond our control?

Think for a moment about something you really want right now in
your life, and it’s not happening...

When something we desperately want ELUDES us—
whether that something is health for a loved one,
or the end of the war in Ukraine,
or maybe day in and day out you feel
overwhelmed by life, and want you want and cannot find is some peace
in life—

what’s the faithful response?

Where is wisdom to be found?

³ Susan Dominus, “The Mixed-Up Brothers of Bogota,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2015.

According to Ecclesiastes, it is found in this:
Treat life as the gift of God that it is.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3—

“...it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

Ecclesiastes chapter 9—

“Enjoy life...all the days...that are given you under the sun...”

Ecclesiastes chapter 2—

“There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also...is from the hand of God; for apart from him...who can have enjoyment?”

And don’t misunderstand, the joy that Ecclesiastes advocates is not SELFISHNESS.

The writer knows that we are meant to live for one another:

“Two are better than one,” he writes.

“A threefold cord is not quickly broken,” he writes.

But life’s mysteries are not a puzzle to be solved.
They are events that point us back to God.

“I know that whatever God does endures forever,” Ecclesiastes writes, “...so that all should stand in awe before him.”

Have you ever seen it?

Have you ever seen the wise person,
the one who stands in awe before God,
and treats life as a gift of God,

One Sunday in worship, Sarah was there at Tom’s church, and Sarah came down out of the balcony to the front of the church.

She told them that she had asked for a moment in worship to give her testimony.

What she said was this:

“I have AIDS, I’m going to die, I don’t have long. Some of you have said you’re praying for me, and that means the world to me, thank you.”

“I hate what has happened to me,” she said.

“But I want you to know—I trust Jesus Christ, and I am at peace. Because Jesus suffered too. And he has shown us that suffering will not have the last word.”

“My faith is unshaken. I am not afraid.”

Then she looked at the congregation and said this:

“And when it comes for you—”

(In other words, when life’s haphazard nature is upon you,
and life’s difficulties are too much for you...)

“...remember that I was here,” she said.

“And do not be afraid.”⁴

That is the wisdom that Ecclesiastes is talking about today.
Have you ever seen it?
The person who treats life as God’s gift,

⁴ The Reverend Tom Are, “Innocent Suffering: I Have No Answers, but I Do Have Responses,” preached at Village Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, KS, May 22, 2022.

trusting in God's goodness and God's grace,
 even when, especially when,
 controlling the outcome is no longer within one's grasp?

In his book on the problem of evil and suffering, the retired professor Tom Long tells about a friend of his when he was child, growing up in the 1950s.

In the 1950s...one of my Sunday school friends was a girl stricken with polio. Her legs were twisted and paralyzed, and she was confined for a while to an iron lung, which assisted her labored breathing.

Right at the moment that my friend was suffering with the ravages of that terrible disease, Jonas Salk, in a lab in Pittsburgh, was perfecting a vaccine that prevented polio. But it was not available until 1955, too late for my friend.

She is in her sixties now, her body still twisted by the virus that attacked her in her childhood. She makes her way awkwardly on crutches...But the moment she enters a room, the level of grace is elevated greatly. She lights up with joy every place she touches. She is a college professor and an artist, an accomplished human being with profound gifts.

I have been strong all my life where she has been weak [physically], yet she has qualities of character and joy and faith and hope that I can only aspire to.

Then Long asks a series of theological questions.

Do I think God gave her polio? he asks.
 No, a thousand times no!

Do I think God placed polio in her life for the purpose of soul-making? No, a thousand times no!

Do I think her soul has been formed by this?

Yes....

And then he does something fascinating.

He imagines what would happen if he had a magic wand, and could go back into his friend's past.

He says that obviously, he would want to wave that wand and banish the polio...so that she never suffered from that disease.

But to tell you the truth, I really wouldn't know where the limits of my wisdom were. She is a beautiful and radiant human being, and I wouldn't know what to take away from the personal history that brought her to this place.⁵

In other words, even if he had control, he wouldn't know what to do with it...

Now...does anyone here own a magic wand?

I sometimes wish I did.

But maybe it's a good thing we don't have magic wands.

Because I'm not convinced we would always know the limits of our own wisdom either.

No matter, I can't share a magic wand with you.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, "What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith," Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

What I have the privilege of sharing with you is my trust—sometimes strong, sometimes faltering trust—in the goodness and grace of the living God.

And together, when we share our trust in God with one another...I believe it changes us—the ways we hope, the ways we behave, the ways we love...

Have you ever seen it?
The person who possesses this wisdom?

The person who treats life as God's gift,
and no matter what life throws their way,
they trust in God's goodness and God's grace?

I have. I see that person every Sunday,
when I stand in this pulpit,
looking out at all of you.

Amen.