

How do we live with hope, with peace, with joy in a world that often seems to be falling apart, so full of brokenness, pain, suffering, evil? I think most, if not all, of us ask this question in one way or another. It is not a struggle to see the brokenness in our lives and our world. What *is* a struggle is figuring out: how do we live in light of this? How can we hold onto hope and experience joy and peace in the midst of all the brokenness?

This makes me think of a bit from one of my favorite comedians, Marc Maron:

[The natural state of depression. #standupcomedy #comedysort #depressionandanxiety #antidepressant](#)

Comical...but he has a point. There's so much brokenness all around us that it can easily be depressing. So how can we, or can we, is there a way, to hold onto hope and joy and peace as we go about our lives in a broken world?

I want to wrestle with this over the course of several sermons and to do so I want to look at the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, commonly referred to as the Wisdom Books. They are books that differ from the rest of Scripture and kind of stand on their own. They are concerned with how people live with wisdom, which can be described as *the practical art of living skillfully in your context* (Prof. Eric Ortlund). These books are concerned with teaching us how to learn and apply wisdom to our daily lives, when those lives are sometimes confusing and messy and broken and I find these books have so much to offer us. So my plan is to spend a sermon in each of these 5 books. And unlike a typical sermon where we focus on a few specific verses, I want to look at the whole book and explore a few things that we glean from the book as a whole, what does the presence of this book in scripture mean for us. And keep in mind that while there is wisdom in each of these books for us, none of them on their own holds the whole truth. They are part of the story but not the whole story.

Introduction to Ecclesiastes:

So I wanted to begin with Ecclesiastes. Now, Ecclesiastes is a famously difficult book to understand and the majority of the book seems to be an extended quote as it begins with **"The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem."** (1:1). Then quotes this Teacher until the end of the book when the author comes back and offers a brief epilogue, praising the Teacher's wisdom and admonishing readers to revere and obey God. And by this introduction it seems like we are supposed to have Solomon, the son of David and 3rd king of Israel, in mind, even if Solomon likely wasn't the actual author. But we can think of Solomon because

he lived a famously opulent life and if, as we'll see through the book, even *he* couldn't find ultimate satisfaction from wealth or wisdom or pleasure then surely we can't.

And I'll also say that there are disagreements about what exactly the author was trying to communicate in this book and some have even wondered why it is in the Bible at all. But it has long been a favorite of mine because in it I see the Teacher give an accurate, if albeit unorthodox, picture of life in a broken world and how we can live in the tension between the brokenness *and* the beauty of life on earth. So what I offer here this morning is done so recognizing that I could be wrong in how I've come to approach and understand this book but I want to offer what it has communicated to me while encouraging you to read it for yourself as well.

So after the introduction, the Teacher is quoted as saying:

- ² Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- ³ What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
- ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
- ⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down
and hurries to the place where it rises.
- ⁶ The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
- ⁷ All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
- ⁸ All things are wearisome,
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing
or the ear filled with hearing.
- ⁹ What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

And a few verses later, the Teacher says, “When I observed all that happens under the sun, I realized that everything is pointless, a chasing after the wind.” (1:14).

He’s a great motivational speaker isn’t he! He is just lamenting of life on earth. The earth keeps spinning and no one and nothing is ultimately fulfilled or satisfied.

Hevel and Chasing after Wind

But in these first verses of Ecclesiastes we are introduced to a couple vital concepts for understanding this book. The first is the word here translated as “vanity.” “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” (NRSVUE). Elsewhere it is translated as meaningless (NIV) or pointless (CEB). But the Hebrew word here is ‘Hevel’ and it literally means ‘vapor’ or ‘breath.’

And I appreciate Commentator Douglas B. Miller’s argument that it would perhaps be better if that word, vapor, was used throughout Ecclesiastes because the author seems to want the reader to think of that image of vapor when they use the word, and to think of different aspects of that image at different times. (p. 28).

Miller states that Hevel is “**an image that holds together a set of meanings that cannot be exhausted nor adequately expressed by any single meaning.**” (p. 237). The image of vapor, at different places in the book, makes us think of something that is insubstantial (in that it doesn’t achieve its ultimate purpose, doesn’t fulfill or satisfy, kind of an empty promise), something that is transient (in that it is fleeting, short-lived), or something that is foul or wrong or absurd in that it just doesn’t make sense (Ortlund, p. 78).

And the Teacher says that everything is vapor arguing, I think, that nothing on this earth is untouched by Hevel, untouched by insubstantiality, transience, or absurdity. My Old Testament professor, Eric Ortlund, said, “**This is [the Teacher’s] fundamental claim about life under the sun: [There’s] something screwy, un-master-able about our lives.**” (p. 78). It’s not that everything is bad or everything in and of itself is hevel or vapor, but that there is nothing that is untouched by hevel, nothing that is completely free from incongruity, absurdity, transience. Hevel touches everything. (Ortlund, p. 78). I’ve come to appreciate this word and all it entails so have called this sermon: Hope in Hevel.

A second vital and related image that’s important to the Teacher is the phrase “a chasing after the wind.” Picture chasing the wind. The message here it seems is that ultimate meaning and fulfillment in life is something we can never quite grasp

even though it seems ‘right there’ at times. This isn’t to say we can’t experience these things in part...but not in an ultimate, final, complete way.

And so after this cheerful introduction, the Teacher goes on from here to make their case and show us how he has found that everything in life, everything humans look to for ultimate meaning and purpose and joy, is touched in some way by Hevel. (Ryken, p. 19).

Summary of rest of book

So the Teacher sets their attention on our work, on pleasure, on wealth and accumulating possessions and beautiful things, on wisdom and knowledge and righteousness. All these things that may hold the answer for how to find ultimate fulfillment. And time and again the Teacher finds they are all touched by the reality of Hevel. **“when I surveyed all that my hands had done, and what I had worked so hard to achieve, I realized that it was pointless [hevel/vapor]—a chasing after wind.”** (2:11). And again, it is not that everything is all bad all the time. The Teacher, for instance, acknowledges the benefits of living wisely and righteously and even shares wisdom with us. It’s just that this pursuit too is touched by Hevel and doing this does not guarantee all will go well for you.

And a big theme here, a big reason the Teacher always comes back to the presence of Hevel, is the reality of death. Douglas Miller states, **“sometimes in the foreground and other times in the background, the reality of death, for [the Teacher], affects everything else.”** (p. 27). They lament that in the end, the same fate awaits us all and we have less control over this than we like to think.

So how can a book like this, a book that seems to be so depressing, help us answer the question about how to live with hope and joy and peace in the midst of a broken world?

Conclusion:

Here is why I love this book and why I believe it is applicable for us as we wrestle with this question. I see the Teacher taking us on a journey through this book. Douglas Miller says, **“First, [the Teacher] urges readers to acknowledge and accept the vapor nature of all human experience”** (p. 31). In Buddhism they speak of 4 noble truths and the first is similar to this, simply acknowledging the reality of suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh says, **“We have to recognize and acknowledge the presence of this suffering and touch it.”** The argument seems

to be that in order to experience greater peace, a person has to start with this honest evaluation of life in this world.

And this is what I see the Teacher leading us to, coming to terms with the reality of Hevel and all it touches as a necessary step in a human's journey. Then, they encourage us to not just accept easy answers or black and white thinking. Like Job, who we'll look at next week, who continually pushed back against his friends who insisted that bad things only happen if you've done something bad so repent and all will go well, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes encourages us to not settle for simplistic ideas like if you live wisely and righteously all will go well for you, or that getting more money, more stuff, will satisfy. Rather, as Douglas Miller puts it, the Teacher **"invites readers to adopt *good* ways of responding to life's realities"** (p. 32) and mentions things like accepting our portion in life, enjoying the good gifts God has given, cultivating contentment, community, generosity, justice, wisdom, and diligence (p. 32).

And if you read through Ecclesiastes you notice that sprinkled throughout the book, in between hard and sometimes depressing reflections, the Teacher seems to advocate the enjoyment of life and the blessings within it. They say:

- "This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us" (5:18).
- "Go, eat your food joyfully and drink your wine happily because God has already accepted what you do....Enjoy life with your dearly loved spouse all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun." (9:7-9)

Now, we can take this to mean, life is pointless so may as well grab as much joy as we can before we die, kind of a nihilistic and resigned attitude. But I've come to see this, rather, as advocating a deeper acceptance of our humanity and all the limitations that come with that, and the experience of a joy and a peace that can come when we don't feel the need to strive to be like God, to need to control everything or understand everything. The Author even comes back at the end of the book, after finishing their quote of the Teacher, and makes sure we remember that we are not God but are called to revere and follow God (12:13).

Now, Ecclesiastes is part of our Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, so I wanted to look at how some teachers from the Jewish faith understood Ecclesiastes. So I will draw things to a close with that. Mari Chernow, an Assistant Rabbi and a writer on

reformjudaism.org talks about this concept of Hevel, this image of vapor or breath and says, **“Breath comes and goes in an instant, but that does not make it insignificant; rather, every breath is significant. [The Teacher] teaches us to concentrate on the matters that we can control without losing sleep over those we can’t. We are off the hook from trying to change the rhythm of the seas and the stars. We are off the hook from trying to find the fountain of youth. *We are off the hook from trying to find the magic insight that is going to fix all of humanity and create a struggle-free life.* Rather, we can live in the moment and infuse each breath with meaning....live every single moment under the sun that God has given you.”** (Chernow).

I think one of the ways we can read Ecclesiastes is along these lines. Perhaps coming to terms with our humanity, with our limited control over our existence, with the brokenness we experience, can free us to embrace the gift of life with all its complexities *and* the God who gives life. There is both brokenness *and* beauty in life on earth and perhaps the way to joy and hope and peace is not through pretending Hevel doesn’t exist but in accepting Hevel, and finding hope in the midst of it and in the midst of embracing all of life.

Another writer from reformjudaism.org, Audrey Korotkin, has a beautiful quote I want to end with: **“Rather than a message of futility, this reads as a message of hope: Even if we cannot make sense of life in some grand cosmic sense, we can find purpose and satisfaction in the tasks of daily life. We can create, and we can share; we can heal, and we can love. Maybe it’s not all that we would like, for as long as we would like. But God provides us with ‘a time for every experience under heaven’ (Ecc. 3:1).”** (Korotkin).

So maybe the first step to living with hope and joy and peace in the midst of a broken world is an honest recognition of that brokenness that resides alongside the beauty.

Benediction:

As you walk out your journeys, may you feel the gentle presence of the Christ leading you into deeper hope, deeper peace, deeper joy, not through ignoring the Hevel that touches our lives, but in acknowledging and wrestling with its reality all the while growing in the freedom to enjoy the lives God has given us. May we experience hope in the hevel!

References

Chernow, Mari. [Hakol Havel, "Everything Is Breath" | Reform Judaism](#)

Hanh, Thich Nhat. (1998). *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. Harmony Books, New York.

Korotkin, Audrey R. [So, What's the Point? Ecclesiastes and Chol HaMo-eid Sukkot | Reform Judaism](#)

Miller, Douglas B. (2010). *Ecclesiastes*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Douglas B. Miller and Loren L. Johns (Eds.). Herald Press, Waterloo ON.

Ortlund, Eric. (Fall, 2015). BT 615: Old Testament Wisdom Literature: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes. Class notes.

Ryken, Philip Graham. (2010). *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*. Preaching the Word series. R. Kent Hughes (Ed.). Crossway, Wheaton IL.