Sermon on Ecclesiastes 12:8-14
*The Pickled Ginger of the Bible: Why We Need Ecclesiastes*

He sat across from me with a deflated look, “I’m not motivated, I can’t concentrate, I feel like quitting; I’m pretty sure I’m depressed.”

“But you’re almost finished,” I managed to say. “But that’s the problem, what then?” he said.

I had learned to recognized his type; raised in a strict Christian family, after high school, a bit of Bible school then an undergraduate degree in a Christian university that featured more theology and finally a Masters of Divinity, all with no break!

Now 25 years old he had run into a brick wall: I call it the failure to live a real life sickness, as if the reading of many books could answer his questions; as if learning *about* the Bible, *about* God was the same thing as God’s wisdom for living.

I said to him, “take a break, get a job, find love; make some friends and struggle for a bit to put food on the table, literally: learn to cook for yourself.

He had gone into graduate work thinking it would answer his gnawing questions and discovered that although he’d been able to answer some, he now had a lot more and of a different kind!

Maybe you can relate, perhaps you’ve come to church hoping to find help with your problems; perhaps you’ve found some answers but you’ve also discovered more questions, more challenges than you’d thought you would and it’s a bit, maybe a lot discouraging!

The closing paragraph of Ecclesiastes recognizes my friend’s, indeed all of our dilemmas in this regard and offers us some insight.

We start with the book’s theme, the theme we talked about three Sundays ago, “Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity;” which we discovered is an apt description of our experiences in life;

it’s not that everything is vain as in worthless or meaningless (what my seminary friend was fearing), but everything is fleeting, nothing lasts and that our attempts to secure our future through “gaining” wisdom, knowledge, wealth or pleasure leaves us in a state disillusionment and sometimes even despair.

In other words it’s when we do good things the wrong way or from the wrong perspective that these otherwise good things begin to *feel* meaningless.

As I tried to show last week, to live with fleeting things and realities is not to give up on meaning; it’s not to try to seize the present moment in a selfish frenzy, but, rather, in whatever season of life we find ourselves, we keep aware of God and the strength and direction that flows from the divine life.

Now at the end of the book, having parsed everyday delights like eating and drinking, and everyday travesties like working too much and not getting the credit and everything in between; everything that humans do “under the sun,” the Teacher lets us know that his original refrain still holds, “everything is fleeting.”

We’re not wrong to wonder if this insight hasn’t left us with as many questions as we’ve answered. From one perspective that would be right. Ecclesiastes isn’t the type of book that is concerned to find resolutions to all the problems it has raised.

There is good in life and there’s a lot of bad and it’s difficult to square that knowledge.

At the same time, reading a book like Ecclesiastes helps us process the fact that we need more than what we find here. Ecclesiastes gives us an important perspective but it’s part of a much larger whole.

That larger whole includes the story of Israel’s rescue from the false gods of the ancient near east, the superpower politics of the day.

That larger story unfolds the coming of the world’s Saviour and Lord.

From the perspective of the Israelites that lived hundreds of years after the Red Sea rescue, and for 21st century Christians that live 2000 year after the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the message of Ecclesiastes can seem a refreshing blast of realism when the stories we’ve learned that belong to this larger story feel so overly familiar as to be irrelevant.

It may seem a strange illustration but stay with me: for those of you that like Sushi you’ll know that the flavours of the different types of raw fish are subtle. To help your taste buds recover and get ready for the full taste of each piece, the Japanese introduced a palate cleanser, finely shaved pieces of pickled ginger.

After eating a piece, you’re ready for the new flavour to be reintroduced. Ecclesiastes is like the pickled ginger of the Bible.

Though pickled ginger has its own unique and satisfying flavour, you don’t want a meal of it. When we sink ourselves into the perspective of Ecclesiastes and feel the weight of what he’s saying we begin to be hungry for something beyond the perspective of human experience.

The perspective of Ecclesiastes is critical and basic but without more we’re left on our own.

The Bible witnesses to this “more,” this amazing story of God’s pursuit of humankind and the amazing promises that begin to open to us in Jesus Christ who is now our divine brother, opening up a place for us inside of God’s forgiveness and empowerment.

But of course, as our gospel text reveals this week, just because *that* has happened and *is* happening doesn’t bring answers to all our questions, doesn’t necessarily bring peace to our households.

As the Bible does so brilliantly, the story unfolds but the perspectives of all the parts still hold as well; all the challenges of living still remain though we happen to live on the other side of events that have changed the world.

The unfolding of God’s story brings its own, now even more urgent questions and conflicts that can reach into the heart of even our closest relations.

Often, we wonder—or at least I do!—would it not be better to settle for a less strenuous, less contentious path than one that goes through the heart of our most closely held loves and our deepest desires?

I hear you. The Bible holds our longing for ordinary delights and normal human relations in tension with this missional call to become something we could never be without God’s help.

This is in some way the different perspectives of Ecclesiastes and the Gospels summarized.

But they also share a perspective, as the Teacher says with poignant force, as *our supreme* teacher says with characteristic bluntness; sometimes things will get messy and difficult and we say “ouch, I wish you hadn’t said that!”

Like a master craftsman constructing our souls, banging in the nails, to use the image in our reading, God doesn’t hesitate to tell us what is most helpful over the course of our lives.

You and I are in a good place when we take the whole of scripture seriously; when we measure its teaching and allow the insights of our personal experiences to come into dialogue with the cloud of witnesses we find here.

Of course the point of that isn’t simply to know more, of the reading of many books there is no end and no point if that’s all we’re aiming at (I remind you of the friend I met in seminary and with which I began this homily).

But if we learn in order to live, in order to love well, in order to come in awe and worship before the Divine Mystery than we are allowing God’s judgement to sift our hearts now, then we are living into who we are, and how we work best: shards of God’s image; deeply loved and cared for at the core our being, on fire for life.