Keeping it Real!
*Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 cf. Matthew 6:25-34*
Part I: Trying to Grasp the Wind Doesn’t Work!

Today we begin a summer study on a book of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian First Testament, that is called Ecclesiastes. Hey, I agee, the title isn’t all that appealing but this is a book that will tackle life’s most important issues and questions; this is a book that will deal with our hormones and our highbrow thinking (does that get your attention?); it’s a book that deal with our actions and our attitudes all the while helping us Keep it Real. Indeed, “Keeping It Real” is my working title for this series and I may remind us of that from time to time.

Every couple of years or so I like to interrupt the Revised Common lectionary reading order which is a brilliant innovation of Liturgical Renewal since the 1960’s and which has meant that all the mainline denominations around the world are basically unified in what passages of scripture are being read and reflected on week by week through the Church year.

This approach protects against ignorance in that in many independent church preachers simply pick and choose texts on a whim or only choose texts that are immediately meaningful to the preacher or that reflect a particular take on God.

Now even with that said, even the Revised Common Lectionary has biases, tending to highlight certain voices in the Scriptures have been meaningful at certain crucial times in Church history or that are cross-referenced in the Gospels, say.

But the Bible is an anthology of disparate voices, sometimes even contradictory voices, all of which believe they are in dialogue with the Living God and human experience of God. Sometimes we miss these differences and their profound importance if we skip around and pick only, as it were, the ripest fruit!

But what might it look like to take an often ignored book like Ecclesiastes and put it into dialogue with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and with our lives in the midst of late modernity and in the midst of a worldwide pandemic? I don’t know, why don’t we try!

This book has been accused of skepticism, hedonism (pleasure-seeking), and full of internal contradictions and confusion. Again, we’ll see what we find. I don’t find this daunting, but truth be told, exhilarating!

We’re not vindicated in our lives by holding the right opinions or by “getting it exactly right!” We are vindicated, the NT term is justified, by the Grace and Love of God expressed to us in Jesus Christ! We live from and in God’s forgiveness and therefore, from that profound acceptance as daughters and sons “inside of” Jesus’ own Beloved Sonship, we are free to explore, to doubt, to question and to affirm, commit and practice our faith

It is my belief that the book of Ecclesiastes is one of those hidden gems within the scripture that is too often ignored, or feared for some of the things it says but which, if wrestled with in dialogue with Christ, can provide a powerful salve for the times, for our own disappointments, our own temptations. It may turn out to be one of our most powerful allies in helping us stay present, in the moment, attentive to our lives.

So let’s dive in, today, we briefly look at the beginning of the book.

The book begins with the words, “The words of the Teacher, Son of David, King of Israel.” Teacher is Qohelet in Hebrew and is the name of the book in Hebrew. The Greek translation is Ecclesiastes or “Preacher.” Both the Hebrew and the Greek are drawn from the word for “congregation” or, “Participant in Church” in modern English. So we could translate “The words of the Churchman,” or “Church Leader or committed participant.”

In other words this book is given to us by a participant in religious assembly, possibly a teacher but, given what he wants to talk about, the breadth of human experience, he looks for a way to connect with his audience.

To do it, he decides to take on the persona of a King, and not just any king, but Jewish tradition says, King Solomon, the most widely “experienced” and wealthy king in all Israel’s history.

This is a helpful literary device, just as you and I watch a detective show or a reality show because we *aren’t* those people but would like to imagine their lives so how can we know the truth of things we may not have experienced unless we get a glimpse of the perspective of someone who was known as extremely wise, had extreme wealth and had a harem of 1000 concubines!

I mean that’s something! That’s the making of a TV series if there ever was one! What would such a person have to say at the end of the day? Would there be something for us to learn from such a person?

The preacher, the teacher, the committed religious participant says, “yes, there is!”

And what would be the first thing this great “experiencer of the breadth of life” might say at the beginning of all that he wants to say to us? “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

The NIV translation says, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the Teacher, Everything is meaningless. Utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless!”

John Goldingay’s translation, a well respected Hebrew scholar has “Empty! Empty! Says the Churchman, utter emptiness, everything is empty!”

A super encouraging way to start a book that is purportedly about truth, the truth about human life and the truth of human life in relationship to God!

What gives? Well everything turns on a small Hebrew word, *hebel*, the word translated in these different ways and that has some nuances of everything captured in these translations but most literally means, everything is a breath, everything is like a wisp of smoke that is here one minute and gone the next.

And so, “Solomon” says to us, “at the end of the day existence is fleeting.” We say to each other as each decade slips away, “where did the time go?” We look at youths eager to “grow up,” “don’t worry, it will come fast enough!”

But it’s not just that existence is fleeting, it’s also elusive to our control. There are so many limits to what we can and can’t do. And so, what this very first line, which will be repeated at the end of the book, says to us is that all of our exploring in this book, whether having to do with sex, work, food, play, God, submission and other issues, must be wrestled with in the context that you and I consistently refuse or ignore, or literally don’t how, to accept: our mortality and finitude!

But this, thank goodness, what Ecclesiastes helps us with and what, thank goodness, God in Christ, helps us with in the power of the Spirit, as part of the congregation of God’s people.

The questions of Ecclesiastes are not the questions of an atheist or agnostic, they are the questions and observations of a believer who wants to keep it real!

And the first step to “keep it real” is reckoning with the fact that whether you’re binge-watching your favourite Netflix show, whether you’re posting pictures on Facebook, or staring at the blouse you just purchased in admiration; whether you’re playing a game of golf, or stuck in a traffic jam on your way to a job you hate, literally everything can have a wispy, ethereal feel to it.

And in our culture, we try to cope with *that* feeling by accumulating and grasping after, maybe not material things, but many and varied experiences. Perhaps you’ve heard it said, “I’m a collector of experiences” with a certain kind of pride. But of course, however many “things” or “experiences we collect, in the end, death wins!

And so, from the “Solomonic” perspective of Ecclesiastes all of this collecting is useless, harmful even: the more sex you have, the more meaningless it becomes; the more wealth you gain, the less you value the beauty of the treasures you possess; the more you achieve the more you wonder “is that all?”

And when, in addition, you throw in how so many things, from achievement, to recognition, to suffering, to who you end up spending your life with are determined, it would seem, by chance, it is legitimate to observe what Solomon observes. The harder we try to grasp, control, and gather, the more it slips through our fingers!

One of the most helpless feelings I’ve ever had is after someone I’ve tried to help with just these sorts of issues commits suicide or end up in the psych ward. I couldn’t help them break free from the tyranny of their “grasping” perspective.

And so, what does it mean to live well in the here and now? Though Jesus doesn’t quote it directly, it would seem that much of Jesus’ wisdom teaching in Matthew (he is called Teacher in Matthew, so a nice connection to Qohelet right there!) is reflecting on this understanding of the brevity of human life and yet a way to live in the moment in faith and joy.

And so in our Gospel text today, Jesus advocates connecting with Creation and its creatures as a way to alleviate our anxiety, as a way of remembering that they, without thought are provided what they need in the moment and that, generally, it “works!”

And so, in this time of pandemic many of us have had some time to reflect on what really matters, many of us have been taking walks, quite literally smelling the flowers in a way we may not have for many years, or ever. It sounds quaint, it sounds boring, but actually nothing is as boring as burning out your hormones, grasping after what can’t actually be grasped in the midst of the fleetingness of life.

“From the day we arrive on the planet, and blinking step into the sun, There’s more to be seen than can ever be seen, more to do than can ever be done….There’s far too much to take in here, more to find than can ever be found, But the sun rolling high through the sapphire sky Keeps great and small on the endless round, in the circle of life” This hit song from the movie *Lion King* could be a direct paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 1!

Given this, what would it look like not to worry? Wouldn’t all of us like to know? What does it feel like to not want to control, to not want to accumulate but to pursue the Kingdom of God, to live in the now, in the moment? Wouldn’t all of us like to know?

Are you prepared to go on a journey with me this summer and seek to live into a bit more of that perspective: the Ecclesiastes, the Jesus’ perspective? It may do us all some good for as Jesus says in another place in Matthew, “what good does it do anyone to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul?”