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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
August 25, 2019
11th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:134-21
Hymns: 243; 430:1-4; 312; 430:8

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2_18-26

^{1:2} "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher;

"Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity."

¹⁸ Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also *is* vanity. ²⁰ Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. ²¹ For there is a man whose labor *is* with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also *is* vanity and a great evil. ²² For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? ²³ For all his days *are* sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also *is* vanity.

²⁴ Nothing *is* better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? ²⁶ For *God* gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who *is* good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of

gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is good before God*. This also *is vanity and grasping for the wind*. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Vanity --

This word "vanity" is used repeatedly throughout this book of the Wisdom of Solomon. That makes it an important word for us to understand as we approach this book of the Word of God. The word vanity is used in American English in a very different way than what we want to understand as we approach our text this morning. Often times we think of vanity as pride. A vain person thinks too highly of self and his accomplishments. That is also an important subject that the scriptures address but that is not what we are addressing this morning in our sermon meditation. The word vanity in Ecclesiastes could have been translated breath or vapor. Think of it as we walk out our front doors on a brisk autumn morning which will so soon be upon us. We let out a breath of air and there it is, we can see our breath, but then just as quickly it is gone. So you can see if we translated this word as breath or vapor we might have scratched our heads. Some translate it as meaninglessness. But then that is kind of awkward and doesn't work well either. So as we address the subject before us this morning let us think of that vapor that you breathe out on a cold morning and just how quickly it disappears. So much of life is like that vapor especially, as Solomon expresses it, life under the sun, which is life from the world's perspective.

So this morning the Holy Spirit would direct us to in our search for

THEME: Living a Meaningful Life.

I. Pursuing Earthly Treasure Becomes Meaningless.

Solomon was one of the most accomplished people ever to live on the face of the earth. He was the wisest man on earth. He was successful in almost all his ventures. He was one of the wealthiest men on earth if not the wealthiest. He was famous both for his wealth and wisdom. He had a scientific curiosity that led him to study many different areas, and he mastered them, including botany and animal husbandry. He was the source for kings everywhere who desired to own the finest horses and chariots. His fame and his wealth knew no bounds. His architectural feats were amazing in themselves. And then there was his power. His domain grew and grew so that he ruled over all the land from the borders of Egypt to the great river Euphrates. So one would assume that Solomon found a great deal of satisfaction in the accomplishments of his life. What he says in our text of all this fame and success and power and wealth: "This also is vanity."

One of the things that frustrated Solomon and led him to that conclusion was that all that he had accomplished was going to be passed on to someone who came after him. He knew his sons. He had many sons. The one who was most worthy who would ascend the throne after him was a fool, and he was the best of the lot. Solomon saw what we all know, but willfully forget. "You can't take it with you." The apostle Paul wrote, "We brought nothing into *this* world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." (1 Timothy 6:7).

Solomon's conclusion is that if one is hoping to find meaning for one's life in wealth and fame and power, you will find that it is nothing more than a vapor. It passes just as quickly as life itself. Indeed Solomon assured us that is was not only vanity but also a great evil that one person's diligent work and its fruits should be handed down to another who may be wise, or may just as easily be a fool. That's life under the sun. There's that expression again by

Solomon indicating the way life is in this world, the way life is for those who don't know the Lord, but live life for and in this present evil world. That is indeed the whole of this world as it is lived under the sun!

If we are going to learn anything from Solomon we need to learn first just how easily we also may be swept along with the values and pursuits of this world. Solomon started his reign as a humble and devout ruler who prayed for wisdom that he might rule over God's people in a worthy manner. His desire was only to serve the Lord. He used that wisdom well in that pursuit. He also used his wisdom and knowledge and wealth well in building the temple. He revealed in the dedication of the temple the depth of his faith and his trust in the Lord. But then what happened? He married foreign wives who wanted to serve their false gods and Solomon built them houses of worship to practice their false religions. Solomon got so caught up in life and politics and business that he let spiritual things slip, slip right away for him. And Solomon forgot the Lord and abandoned his faith and served other gods. When Solomon neared the end of his life he saw that all that he had accomplished, all that had been consuming his time and passion so that it even became a vexation for him so that he didn't sleep at night; it was all a vapor. It was all vanity and great evil.

Before you say, "That won't happen to me," realize that if it happened to Solomon it can happen to any of us. It happens to many a child of God. It happens all too easily because we are living in a world that has many enticements to our human nature. No, they are not all sinful. Many of our the pursuits that entice us, including our jobs or recreation, are perfectly fine, that is until they take over our lives, and become our reason for living, or our source of security, or the fulfillment of life purpose. Than all too fast we find ourselves losing sight of faith and trust in the Lord, and we forget that all that stuff is a vapor that disappears as quickly as your breath on a brisk autumn morning, and it really has no more substance than

that vapor. When it becomes what we are about, that makes us valuable to our children or to those who come after us, to those who surround us, then it is not only a vapor but also a great evil.

So what's the answer? What was Solomon's answer? What wisdom did the Holy Spirit lead Solomon to share with us but that --

II. Following the Way of the Lord Brings His Blessing to Life.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 Nothing *is* better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. ²⁵For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? ²⁶For *God* gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who *is* good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.

We have a sudden turn in Solomon's observations. All of a sudden Solomon speaks of working hard and enjoying the fruits of one's labor as being as good as it gets in life. What's the difference? Solomon introduces the element of faith, the element of acknowledging God as the driving force in one's life. Taking satisfaction in one's work is from the hand of God who has given us the gifts and abilities we possess. When we make good and proper use of them God blesses the labors of our hands. When we sit down to eat at the dinner table we are able to find satisfaction in the fact that this has been accomplished with the Lord blessing us in our labors. We have a roof over our heads, bed to sleep in at night, food on the table, a family gathered around that table. It all comes from the Lord.

The reason we recognize this as all being blessings from the Lord is because of the faith relationship we have with the Lord. He looks upon us as being good. That is not

because we are so good, so much better in our thoughts and behavior than other sinners in this world. It is because God sent His Son into the world that we might live through Him. Jesus came and fulfilled all righteousness for us, and through faith in His name God sees Jesus' righteousness as ours. Jesus took our sins on Himself, took our sins away from us, along with the curse of the law, and as a result of this act of grace God sees us as righteous and holy.

What Solomon is saying here is that the Lord directs all the affairs of this world for the good and blessing of His people. Yes, even when the sinner is enormously successful and wealthy, God uses that success to bring blessings upon His people. Maybe the rich sinner gives you a job, so you earn a paycheck, and make a living. Maybe the rich sinner squanders or fails to appreciate the blessings of the Lord, and throws perfectly good things out, maybe donating them to a thrift store where the child of God is blessed with things we wouldn't otherwise have. We may not like to look at it that way, that we drive other people's discards when we drive used cars, simply because they have the newest and the best. Or we buy a previously owned home because it the previous owner need that bigger walk in closet to hold all his clothes or it was just looking "dated." Yes, children of God may even wear used clothing because the rich of this world need new clothes every season. Sometimes children of God get food from the food shelf. Our pride may object, but in all these things the Lord uses the rich to gather and distribute for His people.

Blessings come our way in a lot of different ways, but the blessings come to us from the Lord. ⁶ "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out. ⁸ And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. ⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. ¹⁰ For the love of

money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

We don't need to get sucked into the world's view of things when we are already blessed so greatly by the Lord who gives us all as He sees is right and good for us. Indeed we are blessed with abundantly more than we need or deserve.

We need to understand that the Lord also would have us be vehicles of blessings to others, especially to our Christian brothers and sisters. We are inclined to look at life as it is “under the sun” as life is lived in the world by those of the world. If we let that view of life prevail we will be left with a lot of vanity and grasping for wind.

Let the world have its way. We have something far better. We know that this world is passing away. We know that the Lord has secured for us an eternal life in heaven. Jesus came to secure that life for us. Jesus is our greatest Treasure. Knowing His love and grace and the salvation that is ours through faith in His name surpasses all the glitz and glamour of this world. While the world thinks that we don't have a grasp of what's real and what's merely ethereal, it is in fact the other way around. Because of our knowledge of God, that the Lord is our Maker and our Redeemer, we are the ones who have a better grasp of reality. We have been shown what is actually nothing more than a vanishing vapor and a grasping for the wind, and what is real, and forever. The fact that these are things spiritual and eternal rather than physical, and material, doesn't make them less real. Life in this world with all its material things is temporary, indeed fleeting, a vapor. Our life with Christ brings meaning to all that we do as we do all not only acknowledging God, but also to the praise and glory of our Savior Jesus Christ. Then we are blessed with joy in our life's work.

As we enjoy the fruits of our labors we thank God that He blesses us with meaning and purpose and a destination that lies before us in the Lord.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.