



First United Church of Oak Park

Life: Task or Gift?

Ecclesiastes 1 & 2 (selected verses)

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The Book of Ecclesiastes is all about opening one's eyes to both the painful wrenchings and surprising gifts that comprise the mystery of life. In other words, it is a written account of a very human experience, an existential crisis.

The word, Ecclesiastes, the Book's namesake, is derived from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, Qoheleth. Qoheleth is considered by Biblical scholars to be the author of this Book. Qoheleth says, "life is vanity, all is vanity." Vanity is the NRSV's chosen translation of the Hebrew word, *hebel*.

There are a couple of possible definitions of vanity in the English language, the most common of which is "excessive pride," synonymous with narcissism or being conceited. But vanity can also be defined as "*the quality of being worthless or futile.*" The latter is in alignment with Qoheleth's intent of using the word *hebel*, and he uses it 38 times, 12 times alone in the verses you just read. That is a lot of times to repeat something, even in the Bible. Which tells us that Qoheleth vehemently believes, "Life is vanity." Translation = Life is worthless. "All is vanity." Translation = everything is futile.

Qoheleth's view of life is that it is like a mirage; there appears to be great potential and promise of good things that we work toward, make plans for, and place our hopes in, but the mirage will evaporate, that great potential and hopeful promise will disappear as a result of life's inevitable unfortunate circumstances and we will be left wanting, miserable, and in despair. This Scripture should really come with a preface statement: "Warning, further reading may induce feelings of hopelessness!"

Qoheleth would describe life as monotonous, tedious, and futile, and seems to have resigned himself to the idea that "what has been will always be." Some might consider him a pessimist, while others would call him a realist, but the way Qoheleth talks about life is accurate in many ways. Yes, generations do come and go, the sun rises and sets, the world continues to spin, we work, we toil and eventually we die, and then someone else benefits from our labor. This renders life pointless, according to the author. But this is the BIG picture, the bird's-eye view of life. What if we zoom in?

God created human beings, living, breathing, conscious beings, aware of and curious about their existence, origins, purpose, where we fit in the BIG picture, and so what does Qoheleth make of God's role in our lives?

From his perspective, life is a task assigned to us by God, the “task-master” if you will, and it’s a difficult task at that, especially when faced with hardships over which we have no control — sickness, job losses, the end of significant relationships, a continuing global pandemic—not to mention all of the hardships and injustices we create for our fellow human beings of a systemic nature—poverty, violence, racism. Life can be hard, and, if we succumb to the sentiment of life as vanity, it could lead us to utter despair and hopelessness.

But despair is not the only possible response to the fact that we will all die and leave whatever behind for others to enjoy. We have a choice. That is the beauty of free will.

We believe that God created human beings out of love, in the image of God, and calls us beloved. Therefore, how can we believe that God created us just to saddle us with the difficult task of living, give us mirages of hope, meaning, and purpose, only to make them disappear and knowing we inevitably will endure suffering? That god sounds cruel. That is not the God I believe in.

Unfortunately, however, being human means, it is not for us to *know* God’s intentions. We have to lean on our faith, we have to choose how we will understand life and the life we have been given. This is a struggle for us. We want to *fully* understand, we want *all* the answers, we want to be certain.

Is life pointless or not?

But we do ourselves a disservice to try and simplify that which is complex. We often make the mistake of thinking and acting from a place of either/or. The either/or perspective is small, limiting; it is a mindset of scarcity. And our God is not a God of either/or, our God is a God of both/and, of abundance, vast and limitless. God did not create from a place of either/or, God is far more complex and dynamic and mysterious than that!

Just look at us, humans. Human beings are not good or bad, we are good *and* bad, we are sinner *and* saint, we are perfectly imperfect, we are broken and beloved.

Our God is a God of both/and, humans are creatures of both/and, and so, life is also both/and: a journey of complex experiences, a pilgrimage that spans high mountain peaks and deep valleys, continually confronting the unknown and grappling with the inevitable gamut of human emotions, including joy and sorrow, wonder and suffering, delight and despair, sometimes in the same moments.

This has never been more true for me than when I did my clinical pastoral experience as a hospital chaplain. There, I often found myself in spaces of extreme grief and yet would find joy in my purpose of walking with others in their suffering.

So, when I consider the question: “is life a task or a gift?” The answer is, “no!” Life is not a task OR a gift, it is both a task *and* a gift. The challenge is for us to live holding these two truths in tension. The purpose of a task is to complete it, not win or be right. And the purpose of a gift is to enjoy it, cherish it, be grateful for it.

Our task is complete when we die; and the knowledge that life is finite is a gift. IT helps us remember to cherish and enjoy it, and it is also what makes death very much a part of life. Because life is as much about birth and living as it is about death and dying. It’s all connected.

The first breath we take outside the womb when we are born and the last breath we take as our life comes to an end in this world, these are the bookends of our life, and the pages in between are for us to fill. We can only do this if we zoom in from that bird’s-eye view.

In our Scripture, Qoheleth attempts to further his point of the futility of life when he says that it is like “chasing the wind.” Which again, he says multiple times. But life, and the time we have to live it, is all we have as humans so, maybe, there are winds worth chasing. Maybe that is how we fill our pages.

I am reminded of the beautiful and dynamic Hebrew word, *ruach*, which in this passage is translated as wind, as in the wind we chase. But it is more than that, it is also breath and spirit—as in the Holy Spirit. Chasing the wind is an opportunity to chase the divine. To seek the divine in our daily lives, in the monotony, in the daily toils. To potentially find the extraordinary amidst the ordinary.

We can choose to buy into Qoheleth’s belief of life is vanity, all is vanity, or we can choose to chase the wind. We can choose a whimsical exploration of life that takes us beyond the monotony of wake up, go to work, come home, go to bed, repeat.

The BIG picture is that death is inevitable, and no amount of work will change that fact. But that does not have to negate the potential meaning and beauty our lives can have. We just need to zoom in.

God lovingly and joyfully created us, giving us the ordinary gift and extraordinary task of living. I believe God created us to be loving and joyful co-creators. So, our lives should be about working to create a life for ourselves that we love to live, alongside the dreariness and sameness, AND make peace with whatever will happen when we die, peace with whatever we will leave behind

The attitude with which we approach life is entirely our choice, our decision to make. Again, the beauty of free will. Seeking the divine, seeking joy and enjoyment in life is a noble pursuit, a wind worth chasing! The fruits of that labor, of a life well-lived, that evidently holds the two truths of life as a gift *and* a task, are the fruits others can and should benefit from when we are gone.

And so may it be with you and with me.

Amen.