

Chasing the wind

Ecclesiastes 2:4-17, 24-26

September 17, 2017

So here we are, you and me, a hundred and some of us, gathered in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, here together for one hour of the twenty-four hours of this day, for one day of the seven days of this week, for one week of the fifty-two weeks of this year, for one year of the however many years each of us have lived already and however many years each of us have left to live. We are here, spending a few brief moments together in the flow of lives that, when all is said and done, are themselves all too brief.

But these moments are different. We're not here getting ready for our next class, not here surveying our daily list of to-do's, not here planning or serving or eating our next meal, not here going or coming or working or playing.

We are here to think about the bigger picture, not just to "do" life, but to think about what it means, to think about what it is that makes our lives meaningful and how we might make the lives we have more meaningful. Wherever we are on life's journey, we are here to think about the meaning of our own lives, one by one by one, and the meaning of our lives together.

So, Paul, Paul Greene. How old are you? What is it that gives meaning to your life?

And Liz, Liz Thorpe. How old are you? What gives meaning to your life?

Lauren, Lauren Reisinger. How old are you? What gives meaning to your life?

I am Tim and I am sixty-four years old. What gives my life meaning? Doing my best to bring meaning into your lives, to do what I can to help you see things you might not have seen before, hear things you might not have heard before, ask questions you might not have asked before, so you may discover for yourselves more of what it means to live as a child of God, more of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus.

We find meaning -- Paul and Liz and Lauren and me and you -- by making a narrative, by fitting our lives into a story. We make a narrative that makes our lives not merely a series of random and disconnected experiences or random and disconnected choices, but a journey, a journey toward a destination of our choosing, of our hoping. And it is pursuing that journey, following that path, that gives our lives direction, that gives our lives meaning.

It might be the path of hard work. You work hard to feel productive, to feel useful, to feel needed, to feel that your life is being well-spent, not wasted, not just frittered away, but meaningful.

It might be the path of service. You give yourself away -- your energy, your compassion, your time, your money -- because it is in giving that you receive, that you receive a sense of value, that you receive a sense of meaning.

Or it might be the path of righteousness. I am OK, my life has meaning, because I try to do the right thing, because I will not succumb to the temptations and delusions of this world, because I pursue temperance and chastity, faithfulness and holiness and justice.

Or it might be the path of personality. I am OK, my life has meaning, because people like me, because I have many friends, because I am a good listener, because I know how to have a good time.

It might be the path of motherhood or fatherhood or grandparenthood. Your life has meaning when you invest yourself in your children or your grandchildren, when you provide for them, protect them, encourage them, love them.

Or it might be the path of accomplishment. Your life has meaning because you know you have made a difference, because your contributions, your ideas, your gifts have left a mark on your family or on your community or even on the world. It is your legacy, the list of your achievements, that gives your life meaning.

One of these may be your path or it may be another, but whatever it is, it is a path or a narrative that gives direction and meaning to your life. A path. A narrative. A story. Or we might call it a system, a system that helps you make sense of the confusing spectacle of this life, of all the duties and desires clamoring for your attention, competing for your allegiance.

Or we might call it an orthodoxy, your bottom line belief in what it is that matters, in what it is that you should do and be, your bottom line belief in the people or institutions or nation or gods to which you have pledged your ultimate loyalty.

You put your faith in that orthodoxy. You trust that system. You follow that path. Not perfectly. Sometimes you stray off the path. Sometimes you fail the narrative. But that's your problem, not the problem of the narrative itself, not the problem of the system itself, not the problem of the orthodoxy itself.

But what happens, not when you fail the narrative, but when the narrative fails you? That's the question posed by the book of Ecclesiastes. What happens when the narrative of a meaningful life proves empty? When you get everything you want, when you accomplish everything you set out to do, and you realize that it doesn't mean a thing, that you have been chasing the wind?

This is the testimony of the Philosopher:

Anything I wanted, I got ...

My wisdom never failed me ...

I accomplished great things ...

I was proud of everything I had worked for ...

I was great, greater than anyone else who had ever lived in Jerusalem ...

Wait. Hold on. Is this guy full of himself or what? “I am the greatest?” Isn’t he exaggerating things, just a little? Nobody, nobody has it that good.

Exactly!

Do you remember Job? The book of Job says he was a good man, “careful not to do anything evil.” Anything! Job was perfect, perfectly good, perfectly faithful. But how is that possible?

It’s not. The Job of the book of Job is not a real person. The book of Job is a work of literature, a dramatic exercise, designed to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy, the accepted narrative, that good people are rewarded and bad people suffer. The playwright sets the scene, posing the question in the extreme, so that the weaknesses of the orthodoxy may be exposed.

The case of Job, the terrible suffering of a perfectly good man who has done no wrong, puts our own undeserved suffering in a new light. For the purposes of the argument, he must be perfect, otherwise, his friends are right. “Just look a little more carefully, Job. You must have done something wrong. There must be some little sin that you have overlooked, and that is why you suffer!”

His friends do not doubt the narrative, so they must believe Job has failed, but he has not. Job has not failed the narrative, the narrative has failed him. And when all is said and done, he is left with? You’ll have to read the book!

The same thing is true of the book of Ecclesiastes. The Philosopher is not a real person, but an artistic construct designed to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies by following their logic to the extreme.

Is it wisdom that brings life meaning? Here is a man who was wiser than any of his peers, whose wisdom never failed him, and yet, his wisdom gained him nothing. All die. All will be forgotten, wise and foolish alike.

Or is it pleasure that brings life meaning? Here is a man who got everything he ever wanted, houses and gardens and silver and gold and women, and yet it did not make his life meaningful, because he was only doing what any other king could do and had done.

Or is it accomplishment that brings life meaning? Here is a man who worked hard and did great things, greater things than any man or woman who had ever lived, and yet, it was useless, like chasing the wind. In days to come, he will be forgotten and all he has done will be forgotten.

For the purposes of the argument, he must be great, greater than any other man or woman, otherwise we could say: “If only he had worked a little bit harder, if only he had accomplished a little bit more, if only he had traveled just a little bit farther down the road to wisdom -- perhaps even to learn to little humility! -- then he would be happy, then he would be fulfilled, then his life would have meaning.”

But he is humble. He understands that all that he has and all he has done doesn't mean anything. He has not failed the narrative, the narrative has failed him. The book of Ecclesiastes pops balloons, tears down edifices, exposes flawed assumptions, challenges orthodoxies, so that we will put our faith in no orthodoxy, but in God and God alone.

Do you now better understand what I mean by that? There is nothing inherently flawed about narratives or systems or orthodoxies, until we put our faith in them instead of God! Until we rely on them instead of God. Like Job's friends, or like any of us who depend on our own ability to become the heroes of our own stories to give our lives meaning. That is a burden neither you nor I can bear. None of us can perfectly fulfill the criteria for our own happiness, but as the Philosopher shows us, even if we could, it would be useless, like chasing the wind.

Happiness is a gift, never an achievement, always a gift, God's gift.

The best thing we can do is eat and drink and enjoy [this life] ... and this [too] comes from God.

The rest, all the rest, is like chasing the wind.

Have you ever tried to chase the wind? Toby and Stoney have! I take them sometimes on walks, off leash, through the woods between our neighborhood and the Cedar River. And sometimes, as walk through the tall grass before reaching the edge of the woods, a deer or several deer will dart out from the among the trees, and -- bang! -- Toby and Stoney instantly spring into action, running at a full sprint after the deer.

It is useless, all useless! They will never catch the deer. It is like chasing the wind. But you watch them as they run and when they come back panting and exhausted and you will know -- for them the chase is pure joy.

This is joy. This is what gives our lives meaning. Not achieving our goals or fulfilling our dreams or remaining faithful to what we believe we must do. Joy is simply in being, in eating and drinking and chasing the wind. It is God's gift. All of it is God's gift.