

**Numbers 11**  
**Winds of Change – When Wind Brings Sustenance**  
**Rev. Anna Hubbard**

**Let's read today from Ecclesiastes**

<sup>2</sup> “Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

It's a strong opener right? But the wisdom writer continues -

All things are wearisome,

more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,

nor the ear its fill of hearing.

<sup>9</sup> What has been will be again,

what has been done will be done again;

there is nothing new under the sun.

<sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which one can say,

“Look! This is something new”?

It was here already, long ago;

it was here before our time.

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun;

all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Super fun text right? Here's the thing that has always been interesting about this

text to me. That word meaningless? It is translated from the Hebrew word

Hevel(havell). And in Hebrew it means vapor or breath. I remember once I went

to go and see Rob Bell talk about the book of Ecclesiastes and he brought with

him a spray bottle so that we might understand what we were hearing better.

This word Hevel translates as vapor. The author says - Vapor, vapor it is all Vapor.

(SPRAY) We are born and we live and then we are gone. (Spray) This is the image

the teacher is using. Life is vapor. And that's not all – it goes on. We don't even

have to read it all to see what the author is saying – the headings will do it for us:

Chapter 2 says – pleasures are meaningless, pleasures are vapor. And Wisdom

and Folly? – Meaningless. Vapor. Toil...that work you are doing – meaningless –

vapor.

Chapter 3 tells us – Advancement – vapor, meaningless.

Chapter 5 outlines Riches. Guess what? Meaningless – vapor. We are here and

then we are gone. (spray) But if we read further in Ecclesiastes the author says

this too – In chapter 9 the author says - Go, eat your food with gladness and drink

wine with a joyful heart....enjoy life – all the days of this meaningless life that God has given us under the sun -all your meaningless (SPRAY) days.

It is as if the author has given us these two modes. Life is terrible and meaningless. And you should enjoy it.

Because it's so vapor like and fragile – while you are here you might as well enjoy it. We are reminded that there is an unpredictability baked into the fabric of life. When we read on into chapter three the author says, I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. <sup>13</sup> That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their lot—That when they are able to do this -this is the gift of God. This is a turn in the text.

Apparently, it's not merely meaningless. Don't misunderstand, I think the author still believes life is but a vapor –here and then gone– with no predictability, but it is precisely because of that vapor like existence we have that the instruction is to enjoy our lives – our work, our families, our place in the world- and to find something that brings meaning. It's as if the author is advising us - if you can find something meaningful to give your energy to – you should probably do that. Cause we are just here for such a brief period of time.

What I gather about the author of this text is that he knows a thing or two about living life. He offers throughout the entire 12 chapters that if there was life

to be lived, he has lived it. He has loved and lost. He has seen how unfair life can be. He has played by the rules. You know the logical rules of what we teach children. Be kind, be fair, live a good life, be trustworthy and upstanding. But that doesn't always work. And I don't think it's always worked for him. The authentic nature with which he approaches our human condition makes me want to know more. This life he is describing, we have lived it too. We wanted to know more, but knowing more actually brought with it its own grief and anxiety. We have lost people too soon. We know children who have cancer. We have kept our bodies healthy only to get a terrible diagnosis. We have conducted business with character and kept our books clean only to have our business partner take off with all the money. We have loved deeply and faithfully only to be left for someone else. We lie awake unable to sleep because of our worries for the days ahead or the stress of the days behind. Life doesn't always make sense. Life isn't always fair.

The author knows this reality. And so, I don't think the instruction to enjoy life isn't something fluffy coming from someone who has never had to deal with the heaviness of life. The author knows the heaviness of life. Not just the heaviness though the author seems to understand the monotony of life too.

You know this season in the church year is called ordinary time. It is the

time between Pentecost and Advent. It is a time without high holy days or celebrations or festivals. It is well ordinary. And I think our author knows about the ordinariness of life too. I know you do. The same old thing, day after day after day. The same demands placed on you day in and day out, at work, at home. The same conversations, the same arguments even, with co-workers, spouses, and children.

It is a race from one event to another. From one stressful moment to the next. Getting out the door, with everyone fed and looking presentable, while also maybe being screamed at by a 6-year-old – oh wait that might just be me –it’s getting to work to try and accomplish as much as we can only to pick kids up again, race them to practices and performances, have everyone fed and bathed and in bed again. Nothing ever really gets finished; nothing is ever settled; nothing will ever be just right. And for what? Just, it sometimes seems, so that we can get up the next day and do it all again?

And perhaps that isn’t what your ordinary time looks like. Perhaps you are in a different season all together. Perhaps ordinary is a slow start – with not much to do, without the stressful racing about. Just another day to be filled somehow and some way. Laundry, eating, dishes, bills, and taxes. Loneliness and boredom creep in regularly. And you too lay your head down at night preparing to do it all again

the next day.

For me, this feels like a breath of fresh air. He isn't calling us to blind faith. He isn't telling us to seek joy from a place that is untouchable. He isn't guaranteeing faith and works. He is one who has tried and tried again to legitimize and justify his life through reason. In the end he cannot do it and we find him today airing his frustration about all of it. His frustration with life is something I feel too. I appreciate the way in which he keeps it real and invites us into conversation about the ways in which we too are frustrated about life, and the ways in which we might find joy in the journey.

Ecclesiastes seeks to offer a reality check: We are going to die. Such knowledge, however, should not lead to despair but to humility and to delight in the gifts of God, even though we know they (and we) won't last forever: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart.... Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your *meaningless* life that are given you under the sun.

The hope in the text is the realization that the author knows the nuances of life. He knows the fragility and the gray and I think it is important that we know that when we hear him say - find something that brings you meaning. Do that

with joy. Find the beauty in the here and now. Eat and drink and enjoy this one life that is yours to live- because the gifts of God exist even in the places of heaviness. Even in the nuances and the fragility. He has been to those places. And out of them he says – the real gift of God – is being able to find joy in the moment you find yourself in. The real gift of God is to seek the good in the midst of all the vapor that is around us. The real gift is to recognize the good and access the good that is mixed up in the heavy.

I know I know, but Anna, how does this have anything to do with wind? Or our wind of change series? Well...I am glad you asked. At the very beginning of the reading we heard – all things are meaningless, all things are a vapor and a chasing after the wind. Chasing the wind is an ignorant endeavor. Except...I wonder....I wonder..... I wonder if in the same way we might search for joy in the moment, I wonder if chasing the wind could be a whimsical exploration of life. I wonder if we might consider how we could enter the human project beyond the drudgery of get up, go to work, go home, then go to bed. Could we turn meaninglessness, on its end? What if everything has meaning if only we will look? What if paying attention to the details of one's life make even the most tedious activities a prayerful reflection on being in community, or on being fully human? What if, say, washing dishes in a thoughtful way leads to wonderment and not

weariness. What if the commute to work could provide us insight on human life, or a list of things to pray about if nothing else. Perhaps friends, the thing that needs to change is the way we chase the wind? The task of living is ours, and sometimes, life just is hard. Things happen over which we have no control. Life can be hard and it could, if we succumb to that sentiment, take us out. But, life is also the ordinary and constant gift of God to each of us.

Let's take these words today this advice this wisdom to live in joy to seek joy. To enjoy this one life we have. Here is the thing about joy – it has the power to encompass all of life's other experiences. Joy comes along and wraps itself around the whole human condition. Joy is a muscle that we can learn to tone. We can get better at spotting joy. But if you really want to learn start with children. When I ask Collins if she went to the park with Mimi, she says – yeeeeaaaaahhhh. Like it was the most fun she's ever had. But what's more is I could of asked her if she cleaned a toilet and she would respond the same way. Joy is seeing the grasshoppers, because how could you not, and watching in wonderment at their intricate wings and the heights at which they are able to jump. Joy is noticing the colors in the world around us. Joy is noticing. Like when my neighbor Anne noticed the girls like to use her drive way to play and that they were always exploring her front porch, so to encourage them to keep coming she put out a



bucket of toys for them to have to play with when they are over. Joy is when we decide we want more out of the vapor of our lives. Joy is learning something new. Joy is licking the spoon. Joy was when during covid people hid stuffed animals in their windows for kids to drive and walk through the neighborhood to hunt. Joy is trying something new. Joy is finding the humor of the everyday. Rob Bell reminded us on his tour, we can get good at this. We can get good at finding joy. It does not come from avoiding or suppressing the pain of life that will come our way. It comes, as the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us, from going all the way into the heart of it and embracing the fragile and uncertain nature of the whole thing. The joy comes when we embrace that we are vapor – here and gone – and decide to enjoy it, to live into it and to find ways in which we are able to bring something meaningful from it. Maybe its not all a meaningless chasing of the wind friends. Maybe the wind of a joy is a wind worth chasing.

May it be so. Amen.