

Sunday, January 15, 2017  
St. Giles' Presbyterian Church  
Mirror Mirror on the Wall  
Ecclesiastes 2

Good morning St. Giles! It is so good to be with all of you again. This morning we will be taking a look at the book of Ecclesiastes, and specifically, we'll be taking a look at chapter 2. Today's teaching is part of the bigger journey that the Rev. Herb Hilder is taking us on over the next little while.

The sermon series, I believe are a good chance for any community of faith to dig deeper into the scriptures and discover the truths that are found within it.

About a month and a half ago, the Rev. Herb Hilder and I had a chance to sit down over a cup of coffee to discuss the direction of the sermon series as he had invited me to preach today as a part of it. One of the questions that I had for Herb was, "why did you want to preach on this particular sermon series?" Of all the books in the Bible to teach a sermon series on, why did you choose to teach on the book of Ecclesiastes?

The answer that I got from Herb was that he recognized that he had been in ministry for quite some time now.

And, as many do, he was in a stage of ministry where he was reflecting on what had gone on in ministry over the last thirty plus years.

I thought his answer was quite profound, because it helped me to stop and think on what ministry has been like as well.

Putting ourselves in the shoes of both The Rev. Herb Hilder and the author of the Ecclesiastes reveals to us the pastoral heart of where this sermon series will lead us.

No matter what stage in life that we are in, having this time of reflection is important, because it not only provides a place in time where we get to see what has gone on in the past, but it will also help shape the future of where we are going.

Wisdom literature does that. Upon reading it, reflecting on it and digesting the truths that we find in scripture, it can help transform our lives into the kind of people that God intended us to be.

### **Ecclesiastes:**

The book of Ecclesiastes is a bit of an odd duck when we read it in its entirety. It can seem depressing at times, especially when the author begins to talk about how everything in life is meaningless. The author says, everything is meaningless, wisdom is meaningless, toil or working hard is meaningless. These are things that the author is talking about.

But surely he doesn't mean it, does he?

How could it be that wisdom is meaningless?

How could it be that working hard is meaningless?

Does he mean that we should be lazy?

That we should just enjoy life, fill our bellies with food and drink, and then call it a day at the very end?

Of course not!

But, I think it is important for us to consider the message that Ecclesiastes is bringing to us.

The book of Ecclesiastes, though it is a book of wisdom literature that was penned in the Ancient East, has had an enormous influence in Western Culture.

Phrases like, “There is a time for everything” or “There is nothing new under the sun” resonates with us.

William Shakespeare quoted Ecclesiastes in his Sonnet 59.

Abraham Lincoln read from Ecclesiastes as he reconvened congress on December 1, 1862 during some of the darkest days of the American Revolution.

For some reason, Ecclesiastes has lasted the test of time and still resonates with us today. So the question for us, is “Why does it resonate?”

I believe it resonates because it provides reflection for all those who read it. It gives us a good glimpse of the mirror and it allows us to see our lives from a different perspective.

Mirror:

**(SLIDE – MIRROR)**

Over the last 15 months, it has been a great joy to see Alyx learn and discover the world around her. When she discovers something, she makes her “discovery face”. She looks at the thing that she discovers and she says, “OHHHHHH”.

One of the things that she has discovered in the last 6 months is the full-length mirror that Alli and I have in our room. I remember the first time she “discovered it” She stopped and she paused. She noticed that there was another baby in the room. She wanted to go up to it and touch it. She wanted to meet the baby that was in the mirror. She wanted to be friends with that baby in the mirror.

As I was preparing to write this sermon, I remembered this incident and couldn’t help but think that this was the perfect example when reading the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is a book of reflection. Like that full-length mirror and a crystal blue lake on a calm day, we can see our reflection and discover what has been going on in our lives.

Solomon:

The book of Ecclesiastes, is like a reflection. It is a reflection of the life of its author. Scholars have argued back and forth about who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, but the Rabbi's the teachers of Ancient Jewish scriptures have said that it is Solomon who wrote it.

Remember Solomon? He was the Son of David, entrusted to lead the Kingdom of Israel after his Father's passing.

Remember Solomon? When he was young, he was the one that asked God for wisdom in leading the nation. Solomon was known as the Wisdom King. And so his reflections on both life and it's meaning carries weight as we consider this book.

Chapter 2:

In chapter 2, we are parachuted into King Solomon's thoughts on pleasures, wisdom and toil. And the way that Solomon paints his observations on pleasures, wisdom and toil is through an experiment. Solomon, a man who had gained everything a person could have, realizes that the "things" of this life do not bring satisfaction. And so we read that Solomon begins to treat life like a laboratory.

He realizes in chapter 1 that “everything is meaningless”. And if that’s the case, how does one find meaning in life? If the things of this life are meaningless and cannot satisfy, then how does one satisfy this hunger?

This is the question that Solomon poses to himself and in the pages of Ecclesiastes. And so he begins to experiment. And his experiment goes like this. If there is a longing desire in my soul to satisfy something or (x) that is missing, then I must find what that something (x) is.

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***Solomon + Satisfaction =  $\chi$***

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And so in chapter 2, we see that Solomon begins his search of this elusive thing that is missing in his life.

**Pleasures:**

The first variable that Solomon uses to find satisfaction is pleasure. And as we read the scriptures, Solomon tried everything.

***<sup>3</sup>I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. Ecclesiastes 2: 3***

Ecclesiastes 2 tells us that he tries to find satisfaction with wine and foolishness.

(Slide - No need to read)

***<sup>4</sup>I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup>I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup>I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. <sup>7</sup>I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. <sup>8</sup>I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. <sup>9</sup>I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. – Ecclesiastes 2: 4-9***

He tries building houses, vineyards and gardens. He builds and plants and denies himself nothing with regard. He buys slaves and he owns herds and flocks. He gains wealth of gold and silver. He tries to satisfy himself with singers and entertainment. And ultimately he becomes the greatest man that Jerusalem, or in other words the history of Israel has ever seen.

In his experiment, Solomon becomes famous not only to his people, but others from neighbouring countries hear of his wealth. WE remember Solomon for his riches. But it's interesting though, that even though Solomon, by all accounts, looking at him as a person from the outside, we think that this guy, this guy has it ALL TOGETHER! Yet, we get a glimpse of what is happening in his soul.

In verses 10 and 11, we see Solomon's conclusion to this experiment.

(Slide – no need to read)

***10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;***

***I refused my heart no pleasure.***

***My heart took delight in all my labour,***

***and this was the reward for all my toil.***

***11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done***

***and what I had toiled to achieve,***

***everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;***

***nothing was gained under the sun. – Ecclesiastes 2:10 -11***

He concludes this his experiment of using pleasure to find satisfaction is an utter failure. He says that when I took a look at all that I have done, accomplished and achieved, that all of these things are meaningless. He says, they were a “chasing of the wind”. And even though he had gained so much material things, he really gained nothing.

In other words, all of these things that were supposed to give him “pleasure” really didn't satisfy his soul. His soul still longed for something else. Putting it differently then:

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If Solomon +  $\chi$  = Satisfaction

$\chi \neq$  Pleasure

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In all his efforts to satisfy his soul, Solomon wasn't able to find satisfaction with regards to pleasures of this world. And this realization leaves him feeling empty.

Wisdom:

And so Solomon continues his experiment. And the second variable that he turns to is wisdom.

Now, at first glance, how can wisdom be a bad thing? I mean, Solomon himself when asked by God what he wanted, asked for wisdom. But I think when read the scriptures; it offers a very different perspective on the kind of wisdom that he is talking about.

You see, WHEN Solomon begins to reflect on wisdom, he doesn't do it in a vacuum. Solomon's reflection regarding wisdom is juxtaposed, or placed beside wisdom's extreme, which is folly, or foolishness.

Even in Ecclesiastes 2, we read, “wisdom is better than folly”. And so by no means is he saying that foolishness is better than wisdom. But his reflection takes him to the very end. He says, look, EVEN IF I pursued wisdom all of my days, one day I will meet my end. IN THE SAME WAY, if I were to pursue foolishness all of my days, I will meet my end, in other words, BOTH those who have wisdom, and those who are foolish, will meet their maker one day.

What’s the use in pursuing wisdom if the end result will be the same?

That is a DEEP, PROFOUND and very sad conclusion, at least for our modern ears. Very rarely do we talk about death. But to put it into the context that pursuing wisdom and foolishness leads to the same result? That becomes very disheartening.

BUT, I believe, if we go deeper in reflection, the underlying question that Solomon is asking is, WHAT satisfies the soul?

I know already that PLEASURES do not satisfy the soul. And that I think about it, neither does wisdom. There MUST be something else.

In other words:

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If Solomon +  $\chi$  = Satisfaction

$\chi \neq$  Wisdom

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Toil

In all of this, Solomon then turns to the third variable that we'll be looking at this morning. And that third variable is what is known as toil. I think the word "toil" doesn't quite capture for us what Solomon is talking about here. And so I'll use another word here instead. The word toil should read "hard work" in our modern language. Being seen as a hard worker in our society today is highly prized. I mean, even when I talk to friends back home in Toronto, often times I'll start the sentence with. Oh man, it's so busy over here. We're doing so much.

To be hard working or to be busy is something that is so important for us. But I think the reason is because of time. Really the question we're talking about is, "How are you using your time?" And if the thing that you are doing requires your time, then, it must be important. And if you are DOING something that is important, then you MUST BE important.

It's such a strange way of thinking of things isn't it? But DOING something of importance or being SOMEONE important is prized in our society isn't it? But why? Because we believe that it will bring satisfaction.

Like the question that Solomon has been posing over and over again, what is the THING that will bring my soul satisfaction?

And so the third variable that Solomon plugs into the equation is "Hard Work"

And what does he find as his results?

***17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19 And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. – Ecclesiastes 2:17-19***

He says, look. It doesn't matter what I accomplish. It doesn't matter what my legacy is. Everything that I have worked for will eventually be left to someone else. It doesn't matter whether or not that person is wise or foolish. They will have access to what I have worked for. I will have no control over it anyways.

And he ends with saying – “This too is meaningless”.

Once again, Solomon comes to the same conclusion

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Solomon +  $\chi$  = Satisfaction

$\chi \neq$  Toil or Hard Work

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After talking to the Rev. Herb Hilder, I started reading Ecclesiastes 2, in order to refresh myself for this sermon series. And, I’m not going to lie. I started to get depressed. I mean is it right? The first two chapters?

Solomon says,

EVERYTHING is meaningless.

Pleasures are meaningless.

Wisdom is meaningless.

Hard Work is meaningless.

And if everything is meaningless, then what?

But the mistake, I think is if we just ended the passage there. If we ended the book of Ecclesiastes at chapter 2, then yes, it is depressing. The message that we would

find is bleak. I was talking to a colleague of mine in Ontario this week, and I described Solomon's state of mind in Ecclesiastes 2 as a SACK of SADNESS.

You see, Ecclesiastes chapter 2, is a spring board. It is pointing to something more. If we keep reading on to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, we'll see that Solomon discovers his answer at the very end.

Ecclesiastes chapter 2, is a laboratory, an experiment in life. But ultimately, Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is a lament of the heart.

And, what is a lament?

***Lament: A lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.***

You see, Solomon here is lamenting the fact that everything the world has to offer falls short in satisfying his soul. He has not found "IT" yet. He has a thirst that cannot be quenched, or at least, he hasn't found it yet.

This thirst that needs to be satisfied is something that is deep inside the soul of each and every one of us, and when we read the book of Ecclesiastes, it speaks to something much deeper within us.

I think back to the Christian author and theologian, CS Lewis and I think his words best sum up for us what is on the mind of Solomon. CS Lewis says this:

***“If I find myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”*** – C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity.

Think about what C.S. Lewis is saying here. If there is nothing in the world that can satisfy, or putting it into Solomon’s words, Everything (in this world) is meaningless, then really what CAN satisfy is something that is NOT of this world.

And so the question is, WHAT is that THING that CAN satisfy our SOULS, if our SOULS are not a part of this world?

Many centuries after King Solomon’s time, there was a Rabbi, a teacher that made some pretty incredible claims in his teaching. That teacher of course is Jesus. And, i, we see that one of the incredible things that he claimed was that only HE could satisfy our souls.

Jesus says:

I am the Bread of Life.

I am the Light of the World.

He says, I can give you Living Water.

In these statements, Jesus is saying that I can satisfy that desire that you have deep down in your soul.

Instead of trying to fill that void with pleasure, with wisdom or with hard work, I can satisfy that desire for you.

In other words

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**If  $x \neq$  pleasure**

**If  $x \neq$  wisdom**

**If  $x \neq$  toil or hard work**

**Then  $x =$  Jesus**

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In John chapter 4, we read of a passage where Jesus is travelling with his disciples and he leaves Judea in order to go to Galilee. But what's interesting is that Jesus CHOOSES to travel to Galilee through Samaria.

Now, what's so interesting about Samaria? Samaria of course is where the Samaritans lived. And Samaritans were "those people" who were only partly Jewish, they weren't considered part of the covenant people.

But being a Samaritan was MUCH more than just being genetically part Jewish.

Their entire way of life was considered to be slightly off.

The way they worshipped was slightly off.

Their holy places were slightly off.

The way they understood who God was slightly off.

Everything they did was SLIGHTLY off.

Because of their way of life didn't match up to the Jewish way of life, they were considered outcasts, outsiders; they were "those people".

So when we read that Jesus and his disciples were travelling through Samaria to reach the Galilee, this would have raised all sorts of red flags.

In John chapter 4 then, we read that Jesus and the disciples arrived at a town in Samaria called Sychar. And because it was in the middle of the day, the disciples went to the town to buy some food. Jesus, tired from his journey was left at the well. But, not just ANY well. It was the well that Jacob, the Father of Israel had dug with his own hands.

This was a historically significant place for BOTH the Israelite people and the Samaritans. These two people group were tied to this place because of family lineage.

We're told that as Jesus was at the well, a woman from the town came to draw water. But, this was an odd time of day to come and get water. It was the middle of the day and scholars have found this to be peculiar. Why would she come to the well to get water in the middle of the day, when the day was at its hottest? Shouldn't she been getting water in the morning when the day was just beginning to warm up? But there she is and it is at this time that she meets Jesus.

Scholars have theorized that the reason that Samaritan woman came to the well in the middle of the day is because she wanted to come to the well alone. She didn't want to run into any other person for some reason. She knew that most people would have gotten their water for the day and that she would be alone at the well if she went at noon.

When we read about the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus, we soon understand why she wanted to go to the well and be there alone. And we see that in her interaction with Jesus.

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***“Will you give me a drink?”***

***“You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”***

***“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”***

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The conversation starts out innocent enough.

Jesus asks her for a drink of water.

And she responds with all of the appropriate social and cultural cues in place. She says YOU are a Jew. And I am a Samaritan. How can you even think about asking me for a drink, and I would add, let alone talk to me?

And, instead of giving her an answer that would satisfy these worldly cues, Jesus gives her an answer that connects to the soul. Jesus answers her by saying that IF you knew who you were talking to, you'd know that I offer you living water, or in other words, I offer you something that will satisfy your soul.

What Jesus here is saying is, if you think that it's strange for me a Jewish man, asking you who are a Samaritan woman a cup of water to drink, I ALREADY know that what's even MORE strange is that YOU are coming here to fetch water in the middle of the day.

Instead of talking about water that will satisfy your thirst, I can offer you living water that will satisfy your soul!

But for the Samaritan woman, what was the thing that was missing in her life?

This desire becomes crystal clear with a simple request that Jesus makes of her.

He says:

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***“Go, call your husband and come back.”***

***<sup>17</sup> “I have no husband”***

***“You are right when you say you have no husband. <sup>18</sup> The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”***

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For whatever reason, the way of life for the Samaritan woman, was not in accordance with the law. Instead of having one husband, the Samaritan woman had five. We don't know the reason behind why she had been remarried over and over again, but what we DO know is that Jesus called her out on this particular sin. This way of life was not the way Jesus intended her to live and that's why he was talking to her about how only HE could satisfy this deep down longing that she had in her heart.

Friends, when we read scripture like this, it is so easy for us to become defensive. Some of us can empathise with the characters that we find in the gospels. Yet, at the

end of the day, the point that the biblical writers are making is that it is only Christ who can satisfy what is missing in our lives.

Solomon says:

Everything is meaningless

Pleasures are meaningless

Wisdom is meaningless

Toil is meaningless.

And Jesus says,

I can give you living water that satisfies.

Friends, as I've had some time to reflect on both Ecclesiastes chapter 2 and John chapter 4, I've come to the conclusion that when we believe that the only way we can gain satisfaction for our souls is the pursuit of our own happiness, it becomes a very destructive thing. We desire to be satisfied and so we think that if I have taken care of all of my wants and needs, THEN I will find rest. But as both Ecclesiastes chapter 2 and John chapter 4 have pointed out, that isn't true.

What IS true is that when we put down these things that we THINK can make us happy and begin to put our trust in Christ, a beautiful thing begins to happen.

The first thing is we no longer become anxious. The reason, I believe we are anxious is because inherently, deep down inside, we know that things of this world CAN fade away. But, on the other hand, what Christ has for us NEVER fades away.

The second thing that happens when we begin to TRUST Christ is that we BECOME satisfied. In other words, our person, the core of our being begins to transform. We no longer become concerned with the things of this world that fade away, but instead we begin to care for things that God himself cares for. And what does God care for? Or in other words, WHO does God care for? God cares for the OTHER. When Jesus was tested and asked what was the greatest commandment, he answered by saying,

***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40***

You see, when we trust that Jesus is the living water that quenches our spiritual thirst, we begin to understand that HOW we LOVE God is by loving our neighbour. AND when we LOVE our NEIGHBOUR, we in fact are loving God.

The third and final thing that happens when all of these things are put in place is that WHO we are as people begins to REFLECT who God is. Like the mirror on the wall that we look at everyday, we can see who we presently are. But I wonder, if we took these words truly to heart, WHAT will we see in the mirror in five or ten years? Will we STILL see the person in the mirror that we see today, perhaps a little older? OR will we see a person that is being transformed more and more into the IMAGE of God?

In John 13:35, Jesus simplifies this teaching for his disciples and says:

***<sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."***

It is through this transformation of our character as the body of Christ, that others will know the goodness of God and will know of his glory.

***Mirror mirror on the wall, who do you see, after all?***

Isn't it time that we put down the pursuits of this world and allow Jesus to quench the spiritual thirst and satisfy the spiritual hunger that we all crave?

Amen.