

Perfectly Pointless (31July22)
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23 (NCV)

“Useless! Useless! Completely
useless! Everything is useless.”

How’s that for getting your ears tuned in to
anticipate a sermon?

This peculiar, persnickety Ecclesiastes opening
also gets rendered as “perfectly pointless” (CEB)
or “vanity of vanities! Everything is vanity”
(NRSV). The word means breath. It’s transient,
ephemeral, fleeting. Useless! Useless! Completely
useless!

A writer for the webpage Working Preacher
says it was against all odds that Ecclesiastes made
it into the Bible, and warns it “is truly the bungee
jump of Hebrew Scripture’s wisdom literature”
asking “Is your congregation ready?”* Ready or
not, we’re plunging in.

Wisdom literature as a biblical genre usually
seems to me both trite and false, coming off like
get-rich-quick schemes, with Proverbs making
self-satisfied connections between prosperity and
righteousness, though we know wealth is
frequently ill-gotten yet reaps few consequences,
divine or otherwise.

Such real-world evidence gives Ecclesiastes a
relatable voice. This teacher says you don’t always
get what you deserve, bad things still happen to
good people, hard work may not be rewarded, life
is short and then you die.

Is the point of life to be a good person, change
the world, make money, be the best, leave a
legacy? Or as headings added in my Bible convey
it in these first paragraphs: Does wisdom bring
happiness? Does having fun bring happiness? Does
hard work bring happiness? The answer from
Ecclesiastes: no, no, no. So what’s the point? It’s
useless, a term reiterated 37 times, five in our first
verse alone. It’s as futile as “chasing the wind,”
another Ecclesiastes refrain. There’s nothing new
under the sun.

Pastor Jen described it this week as throwing an
adult-sized temper tantrum. Still, there’s value and
honesty and maybe resonance in this.

Since this is the only time in three years that the
lectionary has a passage from Ecclesiastes, I
condensed the greatest hits of the whole book. Here
you go, picking up after our first verse and
stretching to the last chapter.

^{1:3-6} What do people really gain from all the
hard work they do here on earth? People live, and
people die. The sun rises, the sun sets, and then it
hurries back to where it rises again. The wind
blows from one direction and then another going
nowhere.

^{1:8} Everything is boring, so boring that you
don’t even want to talk about it. [Ha!]

^{2:15-16} I thought to myself, “what is the reward
for being wise?” I said to myself, “Being wise is
also useless.” [There’s that term again.] The wise
person and the fool will both die, and no one will
remember either one for long.

^{2:24-25} The best that people can do is eat, drink,
and enjoy their work because no one can eat or
enjoy life without God. [Incidentally, that one
comes right after our reading ends, and it’s as much
of a solution or meaning as this Teacher gets to,
maybe in the simplicity of life and connection to
God, and not striving after something allegedly
grander, the bigger barns and loftier achievements,
chasing the wind. So maybe when your days seem
pointless and useless and short, the best you can do
is eat, drink, and enjoy what comes from God.

To continue the greatest hits, with one that
literally is a greatest hit, with the distinction of
being the Billboard charts #1 song with the oldest
lyrics:]

^{3:1-8} There is a time for everything, and
everything on earth has its special season. There is
a time to be born and a time to die. There is a time
to plant and a time to pull up plants. There is a time
to be sad and a time to dance. There is a time to hug
and a time not to hug. There is a time to look for
something and a time to stop looking for it. There
is a time for war and a time for peace. [That’s
abridged; we’ll get the whole thing shortly.
Continuing:]

^{3:19-21} The same thing happens to animals and to
people; they both have the same breath, so they

* <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-ecclesiastes-12-12-14-218-23>

both die. People are no better off than the animals, because everything is useless. Both [people and animals] will go back to dust. Who can be sure that the human spirit goes up to God and that the spirit of an animal goes down into the ground? [That comes around as sort of a cheery tidbit, like all dogs go to heaven. But then:]

^{4:2-3} I decided that the dead are better off than the living. But those who have never been born are better off still. [Less cheery.]

^{5:8} In some places you will see poor people mistreated. Don't be surprised when they are not treated fairly or given their rights. One officer is cheated by a higher officer who in turn is cheated by even higher officers. [Again, a less rosy but realistic look at injustice.]

^{5:15-16} People come into this world with nothing, and when they die they leave with nothing. In spite of all their hard work, they leave just as they came. This, too, is real misery. So what do they gain from chasing the wind?

^{6:1-3} I have seen something else wrong here on earth that causes serious problems for people. God gives great wealth, riches, and honor to some people; they have everything they want. But God does not let them enjoy such things; a stranger enjoys them instead. This is useless and very wrong. [You] might have a hundred children and live a long time, but what good is it if [you] can't enjoy the good God gives [you] or have a proper burial?

^{7:10} Don't ask, "Why was life better in the 'good old days'?" It is not wise to ask such questions.

[Here's one I feel I could take as a personal mantra:] ^{7:23-24} I wanted to be wise, but it was too hard for me. I cannot understand why things are as they are.

^{8:14-15} Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. I say that this is also useless. So I decided it was more important to enjoy life. The best that people can do here on earth is to eat, drink, and enjoy life, because these joys will help them do the hard work God gives them here on earth.

^{9:3-4} People's minds are full of evil and foolish thoughts while they live. After that, they join the

dead. But anyone still alive has hope; even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

^{9:9} Enjoy all the useless days of this useless life God has given you here on earth, because it is all you have. [That gem is practically ready for an inspirational poster.]

^{9:11} The fastest runner does not always win the race, the strongest soldier does not always win the battle, the smartest does not always become wealthy, and the talented one does not always receive praise. Time and chance happen to everyone.

[And here's a parable, lacking Jesus' charm.]

^{9:14-16} There was a small town with only a few people in it. A great king fought against it and put his armies all around it. Now there was a poor but wise man in the town who used his wisdom to save his town. But later on, everyone forgot about him. I still think wisdom is better than strength. But those people forgot about the poor man's wisdom and stopped listening to what he said.

^{10:1} Dead flies can make even perfume stink.

^{10:20} Don't make fun of the king, and don't make fun of rich people, even in your bedroom. A little bird might fly and tell what you said.

^{11:8} People ought to enjoy every day of their lives, no matter how long they live. But they should also remember this: You will be dead a long time. Everything that happens then is useless.

[Here's the grand finale, winding up by offending all ages:] ^{11:9-10} Young people, enjoy yourselves while you are young; be happy while you are young. Do whatever your heart desires. But remember that God will judge you for everything you do. Don't worry, and forget the troubles of your body, because youth and childhood are useless.

^{12:2-5} When you get old, the light from the sun, moon, and stars will grow dark; the rain clouds will never seem to go away. At that time your teeth will fall out so you cannot chew, and your eyes will not see clearly. Your ears will be deaf to the noise in the streets. You'll wake up when a bird starts singing, but you will barely hear singing. You will fear high places and will be afraid to go for a walk. Your hair will become white like the flowers on an almond tree. You will limp along like a

grasshopper when you walk. Your appetite will be gone. Then you will go to your everlasting home, and people will go to your funeral.

[There you have it. You can argue with this teacher, or find some consolation that a part of the Bible is as cranky as you, or reiterate that nothing changes and it's completely useless. Or you could eat and drink and enjoy what God has given you.

Maybe Ecclesiastes, then, is even a little too Lutheran. We're not going to save the world today, but we can enjoy the summer and have a beer. I might ask: can I get an Amen to that?]

Hymn: Turn! Turn! Turn!