

Viruses and Vapor
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In his sermon last week, Pastor Tom talked to us about the disciple, and later apostle, Thomas. Thomas is known for his doubting, and he refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead unless he saw and touched for himself (John 20:19-31). As Pastor Tom said, Jesus is affirming of Thomas, and thus he becomes the patron saint of all of us who struggle with doubt about our faith. Also note that when Jesus said, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed,” in John 20:29, he is not saying that seeing and touching are not important, but he is recognizing that for much of what you and I believe (about anything), we will need to depend upon the reliable testimony of witnesses. Thomas heard the truth from reliable witnesses; Jesus tells him that he should have believed them.

I am finding a number of very interesting connections between the Gospel of John and the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. If there ever was a “doubting Thomas” in the older part of the Bible, the author of Ecclesiastes, whom I will call the Teacher, is a prime candidate. But actually the whole Bible is full of doubters, and I encourage you to explore and find them.

Way back in ancient times BC, that is, Before COVID-19, or at least before it significantly impacted most of us—more specifically, on February 9, I preached a sermon here at First Mennonite that was an introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is a book about how things in life don’t always go right—actually that was the title of the sermon! “When Things Don’t Go Right”—and since then, a lot of things in our world have not gone right! But much to the surprise of many people, Ecclesiastes is also about how some things do go right, and how to adapt to the hard things so that life can go better. Yes, I believe that Ecclesiastes is ultimately a hopeful book. There is good news there, just like there is good news elsewhere in the Bible.

Today I will quickly review the main points I made about Ecclesiastes in that previous sermon, and then explore Ecclesiastes chapter 4 to illustrate how the book works. My ulterior motive is that I hope you will be motivated to read and reflect on Ecclesiastes and hear the good news it has for you.

Back in February, I offered **four keys** to the book. The **first** one was its style. It is like a **notebook** of observations.

Second, the **purpose** of the book is to **help people** recognize the shortcomings and paradoxes of life and to find the most satisfying life possible in response to them.

Third, the most important **thematic word** in the book, translated variously as vanity, meaningless, and many other ways, is a word that literally should be translated *vapor*. By the way, the “DMT” version is very close to most published versions, but it has the merit of translating this word as “vapor” so that we can more easily puzzle through the author’s meanings. The author is using the image of **vapor** as a **metaphor symbol** in the book. Remember how Jesus used images such as salt, and light, and kingdom to teach us. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes is using vapor to teach us about life. We must note that vapor in that culture can represent several things, just as vapors or fumes can suggest several things in our culture. The Teacher says that life is like vapor in at least three ways:

First of all, vapor doesn’t usually last very long. Steam rises and it disappears. It is brief, fleeting.

Secondly, you can see vapor, and it looks like something is there, but if you reach for it, you are grabbing mostly air. It is insubstantial, almost nothing.

Finally, vapor or fumes can contain harmful substances, even poisonous ones. Peppernut fumes from First Mennonite ovens smell great and are good; fumes from a car's exhaust smell bad and can kill us if we are in a confined area.

The author of Ecclesiastes uses these three dimensions of vapor to talk about aspects of human experience: **fleeting, insubstantial, toxic**. Sometimes one, sometimes another. In each case, he puts other words next to vapor to help us know how he is using it.

Some things in life don't last long: the period of youth is fleeting and must be enjoyed while we can (ch. 11), [human life itself is brief (ch. 6). Like vapor and a fleeting shadow, the good parts of life never last long enough.]

Other things lack substance. Pleasure doesn't satisfy, work doesn't provide security, and even wisdom can't keep us from all problems. [These are like vapor that is insubstantial. They are vapor and chasing after wind (chs. 1-2). Some things in life continually disappoint us. Also, human beings are fragile like vapor and dust (ch. 3).]

Finally, other things are corrupt, wrong, even deadly. It is wrong when the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (ch. 8). And it is wrong that viruses can run rampant and kill people throughout the world, stifling our economy and our ability to earn a living, keeping kids from playing with their friends, and setting people on edge socially and politically. [It is wrong that someone has enough wealth to enjoy life and then has it taken away (6:2).]

So vapor as a metaphor symbol is the third key. And finally, the **fourth key** to the book is the **strategy** of the book. The Teacher establishes his **credibility**, he then **criticizes** wrong ways of living, but then he also **counsels** on better ways of getting through this complicated life.

Like Jesus, who wants us to build our house on the rock, the Teacher knows that there are poor ways and there are good ways to respond to both the hard things and the good things of life.

Now I'd like to illustrate those four keys in chapter 4 of Ecclesiastes.

4:1-3 The Oppressed Suffer

Chapter 4 packs a lot. The first and last paragraphs of chapter 4 concern poverty and oppression, while the three middle paragraphs talk about work. In the process, the Teacher comments about the intersection of material things and contentment along with individualism and community.

The first three verses illustrate the Teacher's **notebook style**. He has observed some things and he wants to tell us about them. Specifically he has seen people in power abuse those who are vulnerable. This is so terrible that he could wish that those poor abused people had never been born. The Teacher is emotional about this—twice he says, There was no one to comfort them! Comfort here is not mere emotional care, but practical support and defense. The next section, verses 4 through 6, begins to explain why no one helps.

4:4-6 Materialism, Individualism, and Contentment

As in the opening paragraph, the Teacher demonstrates his **credibility** here by citing specific examples. In verses 4 to 6, the author gives us three options for a general orientation to work and material possessions.

4 Then I saw that all toil and all gain in work comes from a person's envy of their friend. This indeed is vapor and a pursuit of wind.

In verse 4, he observes that work can be motivated by envy or competition. Some translations say that envy is the result rather than the cause of the work, and the Hebrew could be interpreted either way. In either case, the situation is strife that happens between two neighbors so that there is competition. People work so they can buy things and “Keep up with the Joneses.”

At the end of the verse, we find our **vapor** word. “This is vapor and chasing or grasping after wind.” In this case, “vanity” is a good way to understand the vapor word. This kind of work is **insubstantial and vain**; like chasing the wind, you will never reach your goal. Work from envy will never bring true satisfaction or fulfillment. The King James says vanity and “vexation of spirit,” which also indicates vain or futile activity.

Verse 5 gives what some people believe to be the only **alternative** to competitive work: “**Fools fold their hands and eat their flesh.**” This reminds us of some of the Proverbs in the Bible that warn us that being lazy results in poverty and destruction (e.g., Prov. 6:10-11). The author of Ecclesiastes agrees—being lazy is foolish and destructive.

Both the competitive person of v. 4 and the lazy person of v. 5 have two things in common: they both could be labeled selfish and individualistic.

But there is a third alternative that the Teacher offers to us in verse 6, and that alternative is **contentment**.

6 Better is a handful with rest than two handfuls with toil, and a pursuit of wind. In other words, work a moderate amount and then be satisfied with what you have in one hand; then you will find quietness, rest, tranquility, rather than having either **two full hands** with striving and struggle or **folded hands** with poverty (cf. Prov. 16:8). One of the biggest traps to avoid in our lives is the deception that material things can make us happy or that it is rewarding to keep up with or to outdo our neighbor. The Teacher tells us to reject the first two options and instead be content. Note how he **criticizes** two ways of living, and **counsels** a third way.

4:7-8 Work Addiction

Now we come to the middle of the chapter, verses 7 and 8. Here the author gives us another example that is introduced by the vapor word, a short narrative that gives us a supreme example of fruitless work habits.

Verse 7 Further, I saw vapor under the sun: 4:8 the case of one, without a second, who has not even children or siblings; and there is no end to all their toil, yet their eyes are never satisfied with riches.

Here we find a man who has no family or anyone else to support or care for, and yet he works obsessively. The money he makes never satisfies either. He is the classic workaholic working for no good reason. His work doesn't benefit others, and by working excessively he also deprives himself of enjoying life.

Verse 8 includes a question: **For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of good?** The author has not told us who is asking this question. Some Bible translations indicate that the **man** is asking it, others say that he **should** ask it, others that he **never** asks it. Perhaps the Teacher sees this man working and asks himself the question.

Regardless, it is clear that the author of Ecclesiastes wants **you and me** to ask this question of ourselves: for whom are we toiling and depriving ourselves of good? To the extent that we live like the man in verse 8, we participate in **vapor and a bad business** (KJV sore travail; NRSV unhappy business; NIV miserable business). This is not vanity, the nothingness of vapor; this is the **poison** of vapor. This is toxic and produces death.

You may have heard it said, “All I want out of life is the chance to prove that money cannot make me happy.” But here the author suggests that we may not survive such an attempt.

4:9-12 Work in Community

In chapter 4 so far, the author has shown all three parts of **his persuasive strategy**: he has demonstrated his **competence** and credibility, he has also **criticized** work habits that are motivated by competition and obsession, and he has **counseled** us with one of his creative alternatives: living simply and quietly. In this next paragraph, verses 9-12, he is going to counsel his other alternative proposal.

The persons described previously in this chapter work alone and are motivated by personal ambition. In verse 9, the author begins to describe a different way: working together, working as a team.

Verse 9: Better are two than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 4:10 For if they fall, the one will lift up their companion; but woe to the one who falls and does not have another to lift them up. 4:11 Also, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 4:12 And though one might overpower another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

The author claims that working together achieves a good reward, and he gives three reasons to substantiate his point. **First**, if we work together, and one falls down, another can pick that person up. **Second**, if it gets cold, we can help each other keep warm. And **finally**, if there is an attack, we can protect each other. These reasons may seem simplistic and directed toward a slow and primitive culture. But they offer an exciting and important principle: they urge us to recognize that we need each other more than we usually realize. Today, at a time of virus pandemic, our interconnectedness and need for one another has rarely been more evident.

So, in chapter 4 the author has evaluated some **unhealthy** motivations and practices for our work, and he has given us **healthier** alternatives. This is not all the Teacher has to say about work in Ecclesiastes. Elsewhere he acknowledges that work is hard. He points out that work will never fully satisfy us or give us complete security. He also tells us that God wants us to enjoy our work as much as possible.

ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16

Moving now to the last paragraph in chapter 4. The Teacher cites examples throughout his book, but sometimes he tells short stories, narratives that are a little bit like Jesus’ parables. We don’t know if they are historical or not—they could be—but each of them has a main point, just like most parables.

The Teacher tells this story starting with something called a **better than saying, just like several times previously in this chapter**. Better is a certain youth than a certain king. A young but wise commoner, a former prisoner, came forth to a position of power, and he reigned well with wisdom but was subsequently forgotten (v. 13). This person is described as young and poor. Both his youth and his lack of social status make his characterization as *wise* unexpected. However, his description as *poor* suggests experiences of oppression (v. 14; note esp. 5:8), as does his time in prison, for prisons were often the repository for economic and political outcasts. As is standard for a wise ruler in the ancient Near East, his reign would have included a concern for justice for oppressed ones like those mentioned way back in our first paragraph, verses 1 through 3 in the chapter.

Thus, the Teacher is returning to the theme with which he began chapter 4: suffering and injustice. The royal figure presented here is eventually cast aside by fickle followers. The presentation is somewhat ambiguous. He may actually be deposed, oppressed, and isolated once again through rejection and lack of support. In this case, his attempts to promote a community of justice end in expulsion from that community. But at the least we see that his wise and just efforts accomplish no lasting legacy for him. As the Teacher insisted early in the book (1:11) and will describe yet again (9:14–16), popular memory is transient. Though wisdom is better than strength, the wisdom of this royal figure is despised, and he is rejected. His efforts are vapor and pursuing wind.

As we come to the end of chapter 4, let us consider **how these paragraphs hold together**. In brief, in Ecclesiastes ch. 4, unhealthy work styles mean we hurt ourselves, we hurt our relationships with those closest to us, and we hinder our opportunities to help those who need help the most. If we operate out of a quest for material things and see our friends and neighbors as people only to compete with, then those who desperately need comfort and support, described in the first verses of the chapter, will never get it.

The Teacher is calling us to two things here, if we will only build our house on rock instead of sand: those two things are to live in simple contentment and to live and work in cooperative community. If so, we will open ourselves to comfort others.

SUMMARY

Now for the four keys to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Key 1. The basic **style** of the book is a notebook of experiences. In ch. 4, the Teacher showed us experiences of those who are suffering, those who are working without contentment, and a short parable of how this plays out in the larger community.

Key 2. The basic **purpose** of the book is to help us readers through the frustrations, paradoxes, and tragedies as well as the good things of our lives. Here is someone who understands that, even for those who fear and serve God, life does not always go right; viruses come, and economies stagnate. Yet among the options, there are better ways to live, as he showed in verse 6 and in verses 9-12.

Key 3. The word **vapor** in v. 4 refers to insubstantial and vain ways of living, and in v. 8 it indicates the toxic results that can happen. In v. 16, it indicates that even efforts by the wise and righteous will crumble when people refuse to helpfully participate.

Finally, **Key 4.** The author's **strategy**. (1) He demonstrates **credibility**—that he knows what he is talking about, (2) he **criticizes** ways we are living, and (3) he offers **counsel**, an alternative to live a better life, a life with joy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, at this time of the COVID-19 virus and an uncertain future, a time when it is especially clear that there are some things in life that are out of our control, a time when we are prone to doubt whether God is in control or able to give us the help we need:

May God grant us the **serenity** to live simply in contentment.

At a time when we feel fear and confusion:

May God grant us the **courage** to live in interconnected community.

At a time when we need insight, when the best ways forward are not clear:

May God grant us **wisdom** to build our house on rock, one day at a time.

Ecclesiastes 4 DMT

4:1 Further, I saw all the oppressions that are worked under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them. Power comes from the hand of their oppressors—with no one to comfort them! 4:2 So I applauded the dead, who have already died, more than the living, who are still alive; 4:3 but better than both of them is the one who never has been, and has not seen the bad work that is worked under the sun.

4:4 Then I saw that all toil and all gain in work comes from a person's envy of their friend. This indeed is vapor and a pursuit of wind. 4:5 Fools fold their hands and eat their flesh. 4:6 Better is a handful with rest than two handfuls with toil, and a pursuit of wind.

4:7 Further, I saw vapor under the sun: 4:8 the case of one, without a second, who has not even children or siblings; and there is no end to all their toil, yet their eyes are never satisfied with riches. For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of good? This indeed is vapor and a bad business.

4:9 Better are two than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 4:10 For if they fall, the one will lift up their companion; but woe to the one who falls and does not have another to lift them up. 4:11 Also, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 4:12 And though one might overpower another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

4:13 Better is a youth, a commoner but wise, than an old but foolish king, who no longer knows to heed warning. 4:14 For out of prison he came forth to the king, although in his kingdom he was born poor. 4:15 I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow the youth, second in command, who will stand in his place. 4:16 There was no end to all those people who were before them. Yet those who came later did not rejoice in him. Surely this is vapor and pursuing wind.