

First Presbyterian Church
Ecc 1:12-18; 2:1, 10-11, 17-23, “The Absurdity of Life”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/16/25

Last week I started our Lenten series “For Everything A Season”
with the opening and closing passages of Ecclesiastes.

These are the only passages written in the voice of
the anonymous author of the book.

Beginning with today’s passage and running all the way to chapter 12:8,
the author hands us off to the words of Qohelet,
(a title translated as, “the teacher.”)

Qohelet is described as “king over Israel in Jerusalem,”
but we aren’t told exactly *which* king.

I suspect that the author is letting us fill in the gaps
here to suggest Qohelet is an invented king who is *like* King Solomon,
who was very wise and very rich and ruled in Jerusalem,
but without forcing these philosophical reflections
into Solomon’s mouth directly.

Because Solomon’s descendants might not appreciate that.

This kingly figure, who I call Qohelet, applied his great wisdom to every activity
done under the sun and found that all of them are meaningless,
a chasing after the wind.

We learned last week that the word meaningless is “*hevel*”
which can also be translated “vain,” “absurd,” “vaporous,”
or as “an enigma.” Things that are *hevel* cannot be pinned down,
they don’t give you what you expect.

As the staff and I were reviewing our worship life this past Tuesday,
we considered how last week went, and I said,
“It was meaningless. Absolutely *meaningless*.”

Then I got home, went through my mail and found a bill from the doctor
for some recent visits, and I just took out a bright red pen and wrote out
“MEANINGLESS” (all caps of course), and sent it on back to them.
And then I got a phone call from a concerned congregation member
relaying to me things that are going on in their family
and to be honest it was going on and on so I said,
“Let me stop you right there: What you are saying to me right now...
is utterly absurd and meaningless.”

Okay, fortunately, none of those things actually happened.
But these fictional responses show us that if we take the words of Qohelet,
and try to put them into practice in our daily lives,
we will be the ones who are absurd, right?
It's absurd to do nothing in life but point out life's absurdity.

Nobody wants go around living in a perpetual Monty Python sketch.
Nobody wants to turn their life into an Albert Camus novel.

And yet! There are times when it just hits us that things are so absurd right now
we may as well be living in a Monty Python sketch!

So today, as we explore absurdity with Qohelet,
I will neither argue for more or less absurdity in your life.
The enigmatic and pointless moments we encounter *simply come*
whether we want them to or not.

Hoping for life that isn't *hevel* is like wishing the ocean would stop making waves.
We don't get to control how life goes, and that is one of the things
that Qohelet finds to be so completely *hevel*.

Qohelet says wisdom is meaningless because
no matter how wise you are you can't change the way the world works.

So this wise king tries building huge monuments
for partying and dancing and pleasures of the flesh,
and that was fun! But it didn't produce anything of lasting value.

What I hear is that building our identity and self-worth
on accumulating wisdom and knowledge,
accomplishing great things with our career and activities,
and reveling in revery all fail to produce
something meaningful that lasts.
And if you don't care about those things and live foolishly? That's pointless, too!

Recognizing the absurdity of life sends Qohelet down a dark path.
In chapter 2:17 he says, **"And so I hated life,
because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me."**

We've all been there. The numbness and apathy that come from the daily grind.
Repetitive tasks that blur together day after day.
So Qohelet hated life. I've been there, too, on dark days.

But is this the only response? I don't think so.

We trust Qohelet because he is wise and learned and powerful and rich...
but what if Qohelet is too smart, powerful, and wealthy for his own good?

I suspect that these qualities gave him a false sense of what he *ought* to be able
to figure out and accomplish, and when those things didn't materialize,
it drives him nuts!

We know this feeling. The mythos of our country and of Western Civilization
is that we can conquer any challenge, solve any mystery,
and outsmart any adversary because *we* (like Qohelet) *are the best*.

But are we really so smart that we can solve every problem?
Should we be able to reconcile quantum physics
and Einstein's relativity? It's been a problem for decades.

Can we know how consciousness arises in animals?

Or if it can arise in AI neural networks?

Nobody really knows where consciousness comes from.

We haven't advanced much beyond the thesis of

Rene Descartes in 1637 –

“I think, therefore I am.”

Will we ever resolve the tension between God's sovereignty and human freedom?

Will we ever understand how God can be pure love

and rule over a world which features so much cruelty?

The great comedian Mitch Hedberg noticed another riddle of life:

My belt holds up my pants, but my pants have loops to hold up the belt.

What is really going on down there? Who is the real hero?

If we think we are so smart we can answer every question,

we might be setting a trap for ourselves.

So what if we respond to life's absurdity...with humility?

We might notice that things in life are absurd or meaningless,

but with humility, we recognize our own finitude and limitations.

This is a frame shift that reminds us that we are not God.

We aren't *supposed* to figure it all out.

In the geologic timescale which God has seen fit to use for creation,

our lives only live for a tiny fraction of a sliver

of a moment in time.

Remember that you are one of 8.2 billion people on earth right now.

Or, as Linda Mihnos reminded me of what her husband Pete used to say,

“Don't sweat the small stuff ... and it's all the small stuff.”

Such humility takes off a lot of pressure to have it all figured out.

From there, we can recognize that God's sovereign love presides over all things.
Again and again we see in Scripture and in our lived experience
that God finds a way to preserve beauty, goodness, truth, and love,
even when it seems the powers of darkness are
taking control.

The power of coercive force is an illusion.

The big players in the headlines would have no power at all
were it not on loan to them by God.

The bellowing world doesn't have the last say
– the love of God always prevails.

And last, when our lives seem to be awash in *hevel*,
we can remember the wisdom of Moses in Deuteronomy 29:29.

Moses said, **"The secret things belong to the LORD our God,
but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever,
that we may follow all the words of this law."**

Through faith I believe that God is able to hold together
and make sense of the things that simply don't make sense to me.

We call this category of life "mystery."

When we accept that some things will always be a mystery,
and that God can meet us within the mystery of life,
the Holy Spirit will stop me short of total despair.

By faith we accept that the things revealed to us are enough:

Scripture.

The life of Christ who became like us.

The ongoing witness of the Holy Spirit.

The goodness of the created world.

The beauty of a loved one's touch.

These things are enough for us.

We can let the secret things reside with the Lord our God.

[SLOW DOWN]

So when life is absurd, don't be a hater.

Recognize 1) our own finitude and limitations,

2) God's great love which will have the final word,

3) that the things revealed point toward the secret things of God.

If we relinquish the need to sort everything out in our brains,

we can practice being mindful of God's Spirit *even when life is absurd*.

We can stop living in our brain, and instead be present to God,
ourselves, our neighbors, and creation in this moment.

And we can accept the presence of mystery as the presence of Christ.

That's what Presbyterians do when it comes to the Lord's Supper.

How is Christ present in this bread and cup?

Do they become the literal body and blood of Jesus?

Are they merely symbols?

Presbyterians split the middle and say that the person of Jesus

is mysteriously present when we partake of the Lord's Supper.

This is the gift of God made available for us today.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.