

Of Vapor, Vanity, and Impermanence

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity...

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. (The Book of Ecclesiastes)

The theme is Seasons and the scripture we have selected is the famous lines in the Book of Ecclesiastes: For everything there is a season... As we grow older in this life we go through many changes. And, if we are lucky we begin to understand that life is mix of things we call both good and bad and that finally we come to a point where it is hard to separate our life experiences into such neat categories.

When I am in a philosophical mood about such things I like to ponder the Book of Ecclesiastes. Our presumably grumpy writer, also known as the Teacher or Koheleth, depending on which translation one prefers, is most famous, as I said above, for the lines immortalized in the song Turn, Turn, Turn: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace."

One of my Old Testament professors in Seminary once said that you shouldn't even try to read or understand this scripture if you were under 40! The seeming futility and repeating phrase "all is vanity" can make our friend the Teacher sound like a depressed curmudgeon. But, if we have lived through some of the vagaries and vicissitudes of life we have indeed discovered that life holds many realities and events that, as I said above, can be called both good and bad, but in the end we discover that the things we thought were "bad" become things for which we are very grateful and things which we thought were "good" might not be all we thought they were cracked up to be. It is in fact impossible to unravel the threads of our lives into events we would deem either good or bad because we often discover it takes the balance of many good and challenging events in our lives to help us become wise and whole.

One of my favorite translations of this little book is by Rabbi Rami Shapiro. I tend to favor the more Hebraic translation because the word "hevel" which we have come to translate as "vanity" is, according to Rabbi Shapiro, more of an interpretive reading than a translation of "hevel", which in Hebrew (not the Greek or Latin which we have received) is best translated as breath or vapor. Rabbi Shapiro says in this wonderful piece of scripture, our wise teacher is talking more about the impermanence of life and the continual emptying of life one moment to the next. He suggests that a better, but not yet deep enough understanding of this phrase would be translated, "Breath upon breath, everything is mere vapor."

Vanity upon Vanity would suggest that all of life is futile, but breath is in fact the basis for our very existence; the very genesis of our sentient lives.

In the end, if we encounter this inscrutable teaching with less of an eye toward cynicism, and more of a sense of how we might live in this impermanent, chaotic world with grace, love, dignity, and joy, what we receive is indeed worthy of being called wisdom literature.

The book is still not an easy teaching to hear, but the Book of Ecclesiastes is designed to shatter the illusions of certainty and control, which we so desperately seek, and leave us "naked before the wilderness of reality." Our wise teacher is not trying to offer us a way out of life's difficulties, but a way in; a way to live fully and well in the midst of the impermanence and chaos of the world that is the only world we have...there is indeed a purpose for every season under heaven.

Grace and Peace,
Stephanie