

"Nothing New"

The Scripture we will look at today is from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes. In some ways, this is an odd text to use for Easter, since Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most pessimistic, cynical book in Bible. The opening words set the tone: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3). The word "vanity" here means empty, meaningless. All is vanity; all is emptiness! How's that for a positive start for one's day!

Let's read on: "All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with the seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been in the ages before us" (Ecclesiastes 1:8-10). Nothing seems to satisfy. There is nothing new - life seems to be an endless circle, going nowhere. Sure, there is activity - but there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of happiness in it. Ecclesiastes 1:13 goes on, "It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with..."

The writer tries various things to ease his dissatisfaction with life. He seeks *wisdom and knowledge*, but that's like "chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:17). He tries the pursuit of pleasure: "I said to myself, 'come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity" (Ecclesiastes 2:1). Then he seeks wealth and possessions: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

He mentions **God**. He knows of God, and talks about God. But God hasn't impacted him enough to break through the mood of pessimism. God has not really affected the course his life taken. He's made some attempts to know and understand God, but God remains pretty much hidden: "I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11).

The conclusion of the writer of Ecclesiastes is this: There is nothing new under the sun! "Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before...there is nothing new under the sun." Day in and day out life is just an empty round of activity, going nowhere. God is just a distant Stranger through it all. There's nothing new!

Well, this is pretty dismal and depressing, isn't it! ***But, you know what, I get the feeling that's a description of life for many people today.*** You get up in the morning. Get the kids ready for school. Go to work. Come home, get the evening meal or run the kids to their games or practices. Get groceries. Pay the bills. Go to bed. And the next morning, you get up and get to do everything over again. Or, if you're retired, you get up, putter around the house, go through your normal routine, clean the house, do the yard work, eat your meals, go to bed, and you get to do the same thing again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next.

In some ways we may try to dull our dissatisfaction and ease our emptiness just as the writer of Ecclesiastes did. *Some try to find meaning to their lives by gaining wisdom and knowledge.* I once talked with a very bright, exceptional college student, who I knew was studying for the ministry. She confided that she was still trying to find meaning in her life. Her studies and knowledge alone was not giving that to her.

Or, we may try to diminish our inward emptiness by seeking pleasure and possessions, like the writer of Ecclesiastes. The guiding principle behind much of life today is the assumption that we can be happy if get enough things...be it clothes, cars, homes, money, or whatever. And the unspoken philosophy of life for many people is just to "have fun" (hedonism). Now, enjoying life and pleasurable activities, and having possessions, can all be a good and healthy part of life, but *in themselves*, pleasure and possessions do not give life ultimate meaning!

And, another thing, just like the writer of Ecclesiastes, for many people God is a distant Stranger. We know about God, we may believe in some kind of God, but God doesn't really have much to do with the way we live day in and day out.

There is something very modern about this ancient Book of Ecclesiastes! It describes life for many people today! *Round and round it goes. Same old, same old. Just kind of empty! There's nothing new under the sun!*

—

The soft colors of dawn are just beginning to paint the early morning skies over Jerusalem. There's a pre-dawn chill in the air. Most people are still asleep. It's quiet, except for the staccato chirping of birds. There is a vague, somewhat eerie atmosphere hanging over the city, much like an early morning mist. Some strange things have been happening of late.

A man named Jesus had come to town a week ago. He had stirred a ton of excitement - and controversy. For about three years He had preached, taught, and healed people. The common people loved Him. Religious leaders despised and feared Him. Apparently Jesus had threatened their comfortable power and position in the religious establishment. Jesus had made some wild claims about Himself: that He was equal to God, that He was the Way to God. He even predicted that He'd be killed and after three days come back to life again! The "He would be killed" part had come true; He was executed by crucifixion three days ago.

Out of the corner of our eye we notice a few women, heading to a cave in the hillside where Jesus had been buried. We can see in the faint dawn of early morning that it looks like they're carrying burial spices and ointments. As the women arrive at the tomb, someone else is already there! Or *something* else! A dazzling bright, humanlike figure. All of a sudden the ground begins to give way under them. By the look on their faces we can see they are terrified! The Roman soldiers assigned to guard the tomb are terrified too! They are so paralyzed with fear that they "become like dead men". Let's allow the gospel writer Matthew to pick up the rest of the story: "The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus

who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead"" (Matthew 28:5-7). The women run from the tomb to tell Jesus' followers. Jesus appears to them. And then later the Risen Christ appears to others...and to others!

Nothing new under the sun? That's what Ecclesiastes says. ***But the New Testament says there is something new!*** Someone who was dead has come back to life again! That Someone is Jesus. In Christ, God has acted in human history to do a new thing for us! The morning Jesus rose from the dead, God took us from the realm of "same old, same old" and opened up unlimited possibilities because of Him. For instance, ***God offers us a new beginning and a new life!*** The Bible says that in the death and resurrection of Jesus a "new creation" was set in motion. A new world is dawning. God's is breaking into this present world so marked by sadness, evil and death, and is beginning to bring in His kingdom and His rule.

When any of us turns to Christ and puts our faith in Him, we become part of this new creation. We begin to experience a new quality of living. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If any one is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." We see that happening with the followers of Jesus. Once guilty, defeated, hopeless - life began anew for them when their Teacher and Lord came back to life!

One of the most exciting things in the world is to see someone begin to experience ***new life in Christ!*** I read about a young musician, experiencing the power of Christ in a way that transformed her life. She was brought out of a life of drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, perverted values. She became so grateful for what Christ had done for her that now she's writing gospel music. Depressed and in a state of despair, one day she called a well known United Methodist pastor and said, "This music world is hell - cocaine, alcohol, madness for money. I want another world." She found it in Christ!

Maybe you're thinking: "I don't need that kind of experience. I'm not into such vices." But are any of us all that we should be or could be? We're all sinners, who fall short of what God meant us to be. Haven't you ever wished you could erase all the blots and blemishes on your life and start over? "If only I could find forgiveness and a fresh start in life..." "If only someone could make me a better husband, better wife, better parent, better son or daughter". Well, there ***is Someone*** who can. That One is Christ! Romans 6:4 says, "Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Nothing new under the sun? Yes there is: God offers us a new beginning and a new life. But also, because of Jesus' resurrection, we can ***discover a new purpose for living.*** Remember the sense of emptiness and futility the writer of Ecclesiastes expressed, in spite of gaining knowledge and wealth and pleasure? The English journalist and author G. K. Chesterton was once traveling by train, and absorbed in a book. Suddenly he realized he had forgotten where he was going! (A senior moment?). At the next station he sent a telegram to his wife: "I'm here; where ought I to be?" His wife replied....."Look at your ticket."

Like Chesterton, a lot of people are saying, "I'm here; but where should I be?" We can get so engrossed in the here and now, running a full slate of activities, that we have no *ultimate* sense of purpose and direction. ***But we have a "ticket". It's the Bible.*** The Bible tells us where we've come from, and what our destination is meant to be. It tells us that we came from God, that we've been created to know God, honor God, and give God glory. And it tells us that until our goals and plans and purposes are linked to ***God's goals and plans and purposes for the world,*** we will be adrift!

As a young person, I pondered much about life and the meaning of life. Where have I come from, and where am I going? Why was I created? What is life all about? And it was only when I gave my life to Christ that I began to find a sense of direction and purpose. I know now that I belong to Christ. My purpose is to discover and do His will - to love God, and love other in His name.

Nothing new under the sun? Oh yes there is! God's Son Jesus came back to life! And because of that God offers us a new beginning and a new life...God gives us a purpose for living, in serving Christ and sharing in His purposes for the world. And one more thing, ***because of Jesus' resurrection, we can have hope for the future.*** The writer of Ecclesiastes could only see a future the same as the present: an endless circle where nothing really changes. God was so distant from him that he couldn't imagine God breaking into his life to change anything for the future. That's a pretty hopeless outlook, isn't it? But in the resurrection of Jesus, we have a ***hope*** for the future! 1 Peter 1:3 exclaims, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Notice: "born anew to a *living hope*"!

When we're surrendered our lives to Christ, we can have a hope in the future because we know the future is in *God's hands, not ours.* God can break into our future with *divine surprises!* God can change circumstances in ways we never could have imagined. And when God doesn't change the circumstances, God can change *us* so that we can triumph over those situations we have to face!

And there's something even beyond that. Ultimately, we can rest assured that the future is not an endless circle, going nowhere, but a path that leads to our final destiny: life with God, forever, in heaven. Emerson Colaw writes of a young person saying to him, "I don't want to hear any more sermons about heaven! Heaven can wait! I want help now on how to live each day as I face choices about drugs, sex, career and marriage. I could care less about heaven." Emerson Colaw says, and I agree, this is understandable feeling, especially for a young person. These things are important things in life. But Dr. Colaw goes on: "But there comes a time when the decisions of drugs, sex and career are no longer paramount. We yearn for something 'beyond'. We are ready to go home."

"Nothing new under the sun...what has been is what will be...". Not true! Not true at all! Someone rose from the dead! And because of *Jesus'* resurrection, nobody has to be stuck in a meaningless, hopeless existence!

