

***The Missing Piece***  
**Pastor Judy Bangsund**  
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**Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:17-23**  
**Colossians 3:1-11**  
**Luke 12:13-21**

As a pastor and just as a person, I encounter a lot of folks. You probably do, too. And every so often I find people wrestling with this question: does my life have any meaning? Many people ask that question, often when life has thrown them a curve. It is natural, I think, when life has let you down and you have lost job, financial security, a loved one -- any significant loss that strips you of your future -- that you begin to wonder whether life is even worth living.

One young couple that I talked to some years ago, was struggling to conceive. Finally came the day when the doctor told them that they would be unable to have a child of their own. Of course, he gave options. But the bottom line for this couple -- who had good jobs, a good home and a good marriage -- was this: *What's it all for?* For whom are we working? Is life nothing more than...you live, you work, you die?

But I also run into people who have everything -- family, job, wealth, friends -- but still ask the same question. *What's it all for? Yeah, I can enjoy it all for myself, but is that it?* And they wonder if, finally, life is meaningless. My friends, that is the conclusion reached by the Teacher, a king of Israel who had everything, but for whom it all meant, finally, nothing. It was all worthless. Futile. Empty.

So today we begin with the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, a king over Israel; a man who had everything. This Teacher, as he calls himself, was more than a ruler; he was a scholar. He studied everything; he sought answers for life's deepest questions. He was a keen observer of his world -- today, we might call him a scientist. He studied the plant world and the animal kingdom. He was an observer of human behavior. We might call him a botanist, zoologist, psychologist and philosopher. Smart guy.

In his search for life's ultimate answers, the Teacher also used his position and wealth to explore pleasure. Wine, women and song -- he tried to find happiness in every way known to man. But his conclusion was dismal: "It is meaningless; utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless... a chasing after wind." He reasoned that all your hard work is futile because when you die it all goes to someone else -- someone who may not be wise, who might fritter it all away. All your gains come to nothing, finally. And so he proclaims that life is a fruitless exercise, like chasing the wind.

One might ask, *really? This dismal book is in the Bible?* We might scratch our heads wondering, what was God thinking? But there are some important conclusions that we, today, can draw. The first one is this: that the truth we can gain through observation of our physical world is insufficient. The sciences are important; we should learn from them. In fact, there is great delight in the discoveries embedded in God's good creation: from microbiology to the study of the universe, and all the good that can arise from such studies, such as medicine and technology. To the eyes of faith, God's footprints can be found all over his creation, and I believe he delights in our curiosity and desire to learn more. But not all truth can be found in creation

alone. Science and the scientific method, finally and simply, is a tool that can be used for good or for ill – like any other tool. And it is only useful for discovering certain kinds of truth. So, as much as we, today, look to science for answers, it will always come up short. (And that, my friends, is the upside and downside of the Enlightenment.)

Secondly, although the Teacher knew and worshiped God, he did not know anything about an afterlife. At that time in Israel's history, it was understood that the grave was the end – that if God was just and justice was to prevail, it all had to happen in *this* life. (And by the way: that may help give you perspective on some Old Testament teachings.) The full revelation of God that we now know in Christ Jesus, and the hope of life after death, were not yet known. So, given what he knew, the Teacher's conclusion was correct. If *your* life is centered on this world, and this world only, you will finally come to the same conclusion: that it is all meaningless. The grave wipes out all your accomplishments. You can't take it with you, as the saying goes.

How sad for those whose understanding of life ends with the grave! It's truly depressing. Such a philosophy leaves you with no moral compass; nor does it give you hope. It offers no reason to keep on going once pain or sorrow overshadows pleasure. The Apostle Paul once wrote: "If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (1 Cor. 15:32) He pointedly tells the Christian community, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15:19)

And yet, my friends, how many of us live a life that is no different from our unchristian friends? One preacher challenged his hearers by saying, "If you pursued Christ the way you pursue financial stability, what would your life look like?" Think of it! And then, lest he be misunderstood, he reminded them: "God never explicitly asks you for money; he asks for your heart." (Al Rogness)

The Teacher of old knew nothing of the resurrection. He did not know God as revealed in Christ Jesus. It isn't until we get to the New Testament, and a lesson like the one for today, that we find the answer the Teacher never knew. It's a new teaching: that life is bigger than the one you can see. And we have a new Teacher: Jesus, the Christ.

In light of Jesus, who left the grave empty behind him, Paul gives a new teaching. "You have been raised with Christ," he says. The grave is not the end for you, either. Therefore: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." We who believe in Christ have a new horizon. Lift up your eyes and set them on things of God, not on earthly things. Because the old Teacher was right; this life alone is meaningless. But this life, set in the light of eternity, gains meaning and worth, when Christ is at the center of it.

Notice that this is not a case of being "so heavenly-minded, you are no earthly good." This is not a mentality of heaven vs earth – such that our lives on earth no longer matter. Rather, it is exactly what we have been learning these past weeks: to seek God's will, that God's will be done

on earth, just as it is in heaven. Seek God's will, his greater purposes, and your life will become purposeful and worthwhile, rich in meaning. Because he has chosen to work out his purposes through you. Thru us.

Your life can be compared to a puzzle – made up of all kinds of pieces. Family, school, job, home, and all that goes with it. Good and not so good. And you can arrange them in any kind of way, but there will always be a missing piece – until Jesus locks that puzzle together. Using another analogy, Jesus is the keystone – that wedge-shaped stone that holds an arch together. He holds it all together.

When Jesus becomes, not only the one who saves you but also the Lord of your life, it all comes together. When his will and purpose becomes your guiding principle, it all makes sense. Whatever happens to your life – losses or gains – it all comes together in Christ. And my friends, this doesn't mean that *Jesus* is so heavenly-minded, he's no earthly good. He cares what happens to you in this life, more than you know. And when you give it all to him in the prayer, "Not my will, but yours," you get a glimpse of that bigger picture. He can redeem it all to create something new -- something much bigger than you can see. It's takes faith. It means trusting him.

The promise of eternal life makes all the difference! It means God's purposes are larger than what we can see in this world; it means that what you do and achieve – in Christ – will not end in the grave. It gives you hope, renewed purpose and courage to meet life's difficulties.

So what does that mean for you? To begin with, it means you have a new self -- in Christ. Paul says, let go of your old self – anything that is impure and corrupted. And put on your new self in Christ Jesus – let him shape your life and set its goals. Let the Holy Spirit fill you, producing in you fruits that you cannot create on your own. My friends, on your own you can only chase the wind – a futile exercise, if there ever was one. But in Christ, the wind of the Spirit fills you and makes you new.

It means, secondly, that you now have a new purpose – to be salt and light in this world. To work for mercy and justice; to show the compassion of Christ. To make him known so that others, too, may have this new life. What can that look like? Well, for example, you will find that being a family is more than just doing Christmas together. It means you are disciples together. It means you are on mission together. It means you worship and pray together. You support one another in ministry. And if you don't have it in your own biological family, you find it among your brothers and sisters in Christ. Whether it's family, or school, or work or play – all of it takes on new purpose.

Third, you begin to count wealth differently. In our Gospel lesson, someone comes to Jesus to ask his judgement about an inheritance. He calls him, "Teacher." Where is this young man's mind? On his wealth, his property. How his brother is treating him unfairly. Jesus says, "That's not the point! That's not what I'm here for." And then he paints the larger picture for him. Life

is more than the accumulation of wealth. But we so easily go there. We so quickly major on the minors. We so easily settle for less than what God has in store for us. He wants to give you life; you settle for money. He wants to give you love; you settle for lust. He wants to give you joy; you settle for entertainment.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Jesus put it even more strongly, calling the man a fool. Don't be fooled into storing up the things of this world for yourself. Instead, be rich toward God. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you new desires.

I will finish with a story I saw just the other night on a local news program, about a new approach to rehabilitation of inmates at San Quentin. In this approach, some of the most violent of prisoners have risked their reputations to find a new life. They begin by acting ... Shakespeare. In doing so, they have to let go of themselves to become someone else. Picture this. One 280-lb hard core criminal told how he had to pretend he was a bee or a butterfly in order to learn to act. Over time, acting helped him open up, to tell the story of his own life. To become vulnerable to other inmates. They all began to own up to their mistakes. One confessed that, having committed two murders, he could never see himself as a good person. But, he said, "I can do something." These men found community, and some also found new life in Christ. Although the program did not focus on spirituality, you couldn't help notice that it was filmed inside the chapel; that many wore crosses; that one sang of his search for truth in Scripture. These men have found new meaning; they have found hope. They have found what's missing.

In the puzzle of your life, the missing piece is Jesus. If you find that your life is unsatisfying, incomplete or meaningless, then you are missing the one piece that makes it all connect. Jesus is that missing piece – he holds your life together, giving it meaning. In him you, your life and your work are of immeasurable worth. And regardless of your bank account, you will feel rich, because you *are* rich – in Christ.