

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26

A solitary figure is ascending a high mountain peak--you've seen this portrayed, usually in a comic strip. Out of breath he finally reaches the summit and there, sitting by himself with long, flowing, white hair, usually dressed in an ancient robe, is a sage, a wise man. "Oh wise man," the traveler asks, "I've spent many days climbing this mountain to ask you a question." "What do you wish to know?" replies the wise man. And at this point it is always this question which is put forth: "What, O wise one, is the meaning of life?"

Now because the setting for all this is the Sunday funny papers, the answer given by the sage is always quite comical. But it was no laughing matter when the wisest man God ever created put down an answer to that soul-searching question. In the Book of Ecclesiastes Solomon writes, "Vanity of vanities...vanity of vanities! All is vanity..." And so today, since you are that traveler who has climbed the steps up here to Mt. Augusta, the answer that wise, old Solomon gives to your soul-searching question is, "It's all vanity! It's all meaningless! There is no meaning to it all. Life is nothing but a striving after the wind. Vanity...everything is vanity!"

Solomon did not come up with this answer by the reading of many books. It was his life's experiences that taught him this hard lesson. Not only was Solomon wise, he was also wealthy beyond our wildest dreams. He had everything. He was the king of Israel. His wives and concubines numbered well into the hundreds. He had peace with all the neighboring countries. His reputation brought admirers from all over, even the Queen of far-off Sheba traveled many miles to visit this wise man. Solomon lacked nothing, but had everything he needed, everything he wanted.

But toward the end of his days, using his God-given wisdom to reflect on the meaning of life, he comes up with this depressing answer: "Life is vain and meaningless." So if life is like a movie, and we're standing in line to buy our tickets, out walks Solomon who says to us, "It's not worth seeing. It's a waste of time and money. I give this film zero stars out of a possible five."

Why does Solomon give such a depressing review? Why does he sound like a man about to go to his grave with nothing but regrets? Is it because, for much of his life, Solomon was the Rich Fool? In Jesus' parable this man was wealthy with material possessions. He had so much stuff that he had to build bigger barns. But though he was rich with all that this world had to offer, he was not rich toward God. He did not spend time in the Word of God. He did not think much of being in God's House. He had plenty of friends, plenty of Budweiser. He was safe, happy, and secure. But one night when he went to bed, Jesus said he would wake up in hell, and all he owned would become the property of someone else.

For much of his life, this was Solomon. He knew what it was like to be Tiger Woods in his glory days. He knew what it's like to be Brad Pitt; to be Warren Buffet. But wise though he was, Solomon was lured away from the Faith. He lived like the Rich Fool, and he would have died like the Rich Fool but by the grace of God. In the end God led him to see that his life, rich and happy though he was, was vain and meaningless. All his striving for wealth and honor was a complete waste of time. He would soon die, and everything he had would go to someone who did not even lift a finger to earn any of it. And so here comes Solomon walking out of the movie theater and he looks us straight in the eye and says, "It's not worth it...I've been there. There is no meaning at all to a life lived for riches and happiness. In the end the answer is that it is all vanity."

But still we go in to see the movie, don't we? We want to find out for ourselves. We'd like to have it all, just once, even if it means putting Christ and His treasures on hold. And so we work hard, we forge ahead in life, we try to invest our money wisely, we surround ourselves with friends who think the way we do. We stay on the cutting edge so that we can live with as much success as possible. But our faith we have to put on hold. We stay up on current events, but we put our Bible under a stack of magazines. We think nothing of buying the latest CD or DVD or Powerball ticket, but it pains us to drop a ten or twenty into the offering plate. We make sure we're ready for work Monday through Friday to earn that paycheck, but we do not apply that same criteria to Sunday morning; we often come to God's House yawning, our minds too tired to focus on His words to us.

And in the end it's all a waste of our time and energy. Everything we accumulate, all the treasures we store up will go to someone who did not work for them. When we die we will lose everything in life, and anyone, us included, who is not rich toward God will lose even their eternal soul. Solomon was right...everything is vanity.

There is one exception, however. A life lived in Christ, no matter how wealthy or how poor it is, is a life which has real meaning. Homes, cars, boats, gardens, crops, businesses...these all pass on to someone else when we die. But as you live in Christ, He remains yours even beyond the grave. The only thing in life that is not vain and meaningless is God's living Word. The words you hear in church. The words you sing. That Word which you were taught from little on up. That Word which, to the world is vain and meaningless, but to us it is the power of God unto salvation. Friend, when your life is lived in the Word of Christ; when He is your joy; when He, not your drinking buddy, is your best Friend; when the pew in His House, not the couch in front of the TV, is the place where you are refreshed--when you are rich toward God, then no matter what life is like...good or evil, rich or poor, happy or sad, life is not without meaning.

Solomon, as depressing as his words are, does proclaim for us good news, although perhaps in an odd sort of way. "A person," he says, "who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill, must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it." How true these words are for us...but how true especially for Jesus. Is there anyone who toiled with more wisdom than Christ? Did anyone use more knowledge and skill than He did? He worked tirelessly and kept every one of the Commandments. He applied wisdom to every word He said, everything He ever did. And who gets, when He dies, everything that He worked so hard for? We do...you and me...worthless, unwise sinners who did not lift a finger to earn any of it. In fact we could not lift a finger. The work Jesus did, we are unable to do. The Commandments He kept, we have broken--all of them, and still do every day.

But friend, it's all yours. Everything Jesus gained, because He died on the cross for you, now belongs to you through faith. Not some brick dream home here on earth--a mansion in heaven. Not peace with your enemies over in Afghanistan--peace with God forever. Not money, gold, and silver to buy you happiness for a time--the true joy of knowing your sins He died to forgive; that you will rise in the Resurrection with a glorified body like His. You get everything. And so it's okay, as Solomon moans, for others to inherit all that we have worked for, because we get what Jesus worked for--a place with Him in heaven forever.

Solomon moaned that living life is like striving after the wind; always seeking to grasp, but never holding on to those things we work so hard for. But the good news is that Jesus, here in His Word and Sacraments, grasps you. We don't hold on to Him so well, but He holds on to you. You may think that sitting in His House week after week can become a pretty monotonous routine, but it's

precisely through Him putting His words into your ears over and over that Jesus, who grasped you in your baptism, now holds on to you for eternal life.

So it's good that you have made the climb up here to Mt. Augusta today. The Wise One who is present here is not King Solomon, but one of his descendants -- He who climbed a different mountain for you, where He gave up all He had in exchange for a cross. Jesus is present with you. He knows what your soul is searching for. He knows what deep questions and concerns are upon your mind and heart. He knows that the life out there will never satisfy you, that anything this world offers is vain and meaningless. That's why today He gives you a different kind of life--a life lived in His love and mercy; a life, your life, which is forgiven of all your sins; a life which death cannot hold on to; a life which has no end. Is this what you're searching for? Then look no further. Jesus gives this life to you now, freely by grace. Amen.