

## “What’s the Point?”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor  
First United Methodist Church of Wausau  
December 16, 2018

In 1984, I read George Orwell’s book by that name. Or rather I read most of it. When Orwell wrote the novel, 1984 was an unknown future, one that I’m guessing did not leave him very hopeful, for rather than joy the story was filled with ongoing futility as truths were written and rewritten to suit those who were in charge. I finally stopped reading because I saw no sense in continuing.

Years later, I read *The Death of a Salesman*. Plays are shorter than novels so I was able to finish this. But right to the end, I waited for *something* to happen. I wondered, when is all of this going to make sense? It never did. Willy Loman’s existence is one of despair and hollowness right to the end, when he dies.

Is this what the writer of today’s scripture, the one who identifies himself as Qohelet “The Teacher,” is talking about?

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.  
What do people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun?  
A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.  
The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hurries to the place where it rises.  
The wind blows to the south,  
and goes around to the north;  
round and round goes the wind,  
and on its circuits the wind returns.  
All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they continue to flow.  
All things are wearisome;  
more than one can express;  
the eye is not satisfied with 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 1:2-10*

The best word to convey what the author means by “Vanity of vanities” is *absurdity*. Not simply some foolish thing, the absurdity of life he speaks of cannot be made intelligible through any rule people use to add meaning to their experience. It’s as if he say, life goes on but with no more sense at the end than at the beginning. Talk about depressing!

It is for this reason that scholars have assumed Ecclesiastes was written late in the writer’s life. He has become disillusioned. He has witnessed many achievements. He has known happiness, but in the end...

In the end, he comes to believe that the rules he learned as a boy – that the good will be rewarded and evil punished, that you’ll get ahead if you work hard, that children will be there to take care of you in your old age... that this whole network of understandings just does not stand the test of time. Randomness, pain, loss, failure and death may break into any life, without warning, no matter the good you do or the evil.

This is not simply the lament of one person thousands of years ago. The two stories I mentioned as I began indicate that this is a recurring problem in people’s lives. You probably know other stories of similar despair or apathy with life. When the characters are fictional, we may wonder, “What’s the point?” but it’s art so we can walk away and forget about it. When this desolation is at the core of your life or the life of someone you know, then “What’s the point?” takes on desperate meaning. Yet God wills us to enjoy our time on earth.

Life is not what we believed it would be in our youth. Loved ones die, or leave. Relationships change. We change. Jobs are outsourced. Children move and distance themselves from us. We age. Our bodies betray us. Infirmity creeps in. There comes a point in our lives when we want to laugh at other people’s illusions. We’ve come to realize the absurdity that is all around us. Sometimes we want to mock other people’s naiveté. Life is absurd!

Except... this is only a partial truth. Life may be absurd but only until meaning is thrust upon it. When we lead lives of desperation, we feed the demon within us that would have us believe life does not matter. On the other hand, when we lead lives of courage, love and faith, we feed that spirit within us that helps us discover that life has value.

Life is worth living. So much of life is beyond our control. We generally only learn this truth as we grow older. Whether we try to control our spouse or our children, we find that they are uniquely individuals, given to their own opinions and ways of doing things. Friends, family, strangers – each one is their own person. We cannot control who people will love or how they will vote. We cannot make them eat healthy or deal with their stress. We cannot make them care. All we can do is love them.

I’ve heard people console themselves by saying this. I’ve said it; maybe you have too. All we can do is love them. It reminds me of another phrase: All we can do is pray. We say these things as if to pray, or to love someone, is a small thing. We’ve reached the end of our rope. We’ve done all we can. We’re powerless to change the situation. There’s nothing left to do... except pray... except love.

How did we come to such a point that we believe prayer and love are such weak actions when they are the strongest forces in existence?! I know the answer. We like to be in charge. We like to think we’re powerful, that we can accomplish things under our own strength. Power matters to us. And when we realize we don’t have it, we grieve. We despair.

What if we recognized that prayer and love put us in touch with the greatest source of all power?  
Or what if we believed it enough that we actually lived our lives around this power?

This is part of the idea behind our Breakthrough Prayer. God, you are the source of everything.

We surrender our illusion of power to you. I may have told you before about my brother's bumper sticker, "If God is your copilot, change seats."

Have you heard of St. Augustine of Hippo? There's a city in Florida named after him. He lived in the 500s in Northern Africa, a brilliant young man from a wealthy family. My historical theology instructor at seminary once said that if someone ever tells you they've read all of Augustine, they're lying. His writings are so extensive it's not possible. Yet as a young man, Augustine had no relationship with God. His mother was a devout Christian yet he dismissed God as being irrelevant. He had plenty of friends and generally enjoyed life as many rich young men through the ages have done.

Augustine's mother loved her son and she was concerned for him. She knew he needed God but also that he would never come to God without some powerful persuasion. So she prayed. She prayed on her knees for at least 16 years, every day, winter and summer. And when Augustine was 32 years old, her prayer was answered when he accepted God's call on his life and was baptized a Christian.

Both of their lives were given purpose through her faith in the power of prayer and her courage to continue in prayer long past the point when many would have given up.

Our scripture writer's assertion that what will be is the same as what has been has some truth in it. But it's also wrong. Yes, a natural order spirals through the cosmos and through the intricacies of life. But to say there is no change, to say that it's all fixed allows for no variation or innovation, no creativity. The world is not like that.

We can – and do – sometimes feel like there is nothing new under the sun, but this is the ultimate absurdity, for we change the course of the world with every act of loving-kindness. We don't think of it that way, but if, as science tells us, the movement of a butterfly's wings affect storms thousands of miles away, how much more so your compassionate listening to a person struggling with an aging parent or a spouse's dementia? Or your inviting a grieving neighbor to attend an event with you? Or spending a few hours helping someone become more employable?

Every kind phrase, every generous deed, every patient word, every hope-filled action has long-term consequences. The memory of these acts won't live on forever yet they don't have to, in and of themselves.

Our acts of courage, hope and love are important in the moment, yes, yet they are even more valuable for their part in bringing God's kin-dom on earth a little closer into being. Your courage to do what must be done and your love, not only for loveable but for all of God's people, are your acts of defiance in a world that says, What's the point?

Through faith, you are practicing God's hope that good will come out of all things. You are participating in the eternal reality of the love of God.

And that is the point.

Amen.