

22 January 2017

The Truth Is . . . Science, Logic, Reason
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; Colossians 2:8-10

The book of Ecclesiastes is called, in Hebrew, *Qoheleth*, which simply means “Teacher.” The Teacher of the title is presented as if he were Solomon, famed for his wisdom. In the first chapter, the Teacher sets out his purpose. We read chapter 1, verses 12-18:

12 I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

*¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

16 I said to myself, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’

¹⁷And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

*¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.*

One of the challenges of Christianity in its infancy was how popular it was with certain intellectuals. They liked Christianity, except for some of its silly, superstitious beliefs, like the incarnation of Christ or his death and resurrection. Paul may have been thinking of some of these intellectuals in Colossians 2:8-10:

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Last week, as I spoke about the sort of Truth that can be found in tradition, I used a passage from Job, one of the speeches of Job’s friend Bildad, who argued that we had to respect the distilled wisdom of the generations. Yes, sometimes evil things can be passed on by tradition – things like racism, inequality, violence against women, and so on – but Bildad’s point still has some validity. We should listen to tradition. At any rate, that’s the perspective found throughout the Old Testament and especially in that part of it that we call the “Wisdom Tradition.”

So it’s curious that it is one of the Wisdom books that preserves the greatest challenge to tradition, offering a very different way to look for Truth. When the author of Ecclesiastes sets out to discover “all that is done under heaven,” how does he go about it? “I applied my mind to seek and to search out.” There’s no mention of reading up on what the sages of the past have said. This author says, “Let’s go see.” And he does. As you read on in the book, you see him try different methods to discover meaning. He tries the path of knowledge, the path of pleasure, the path of wealth. He goes about his quest as if he’s in a laboratory: “Well, that didn’t work. So let’s try changing this variable and see what happens.” In short, he uses the scientific method. He

appeals to his own reason, trusts his own observation and measurements, and draws conclusions based on observable results. This is new to the ancient world.

And it didn't take. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes is what we might call an outlier. The rest of the world clung to tradition as the primary source of truth. Somehow – I believe by the grace of God – this book was preserved in our scriptures, but only grudgingly. It's harsh and rigorous and skeptical and, frankly, depressing. Except for the relatively harmless passage in Chapter 3 – “For everything there is a season” – we don't read it. In fact, in Medieval Judaism, people were not even *permitted* to read it until they were adults. It challenged the traditional worldview too much. (Another book that was banned until adulthood was the Song of Solomon, but that was for a different reason.)

That was how dangerous this new approach to seeking Truth was felt to be, and you know what? They were right. It was every bit as dangerous as they thought. When this scientific way of thinking finally reemerged, in the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries, it challenged pretty much everything. Like the Teacher of Ecclesiastes the Enlightenment thinkers put reason above tradition, experiment above accepted wisdom, and much that had been believed for a thousand years was simply thrown out. Last week I mentioned the traditional cosmology of the Middle Ages, with the earth at the center of eight concentric spheres (one for each planet, and one for the stars), with God on the other side. Science, however, showed that the earth wasn't the center, that it was one planet among many, orbiting one sun among many, with space going on endlessly. It almost made it sound as if we human beings weren't the center of and reason for all existence, if you can imagine. It made us sound peripheral and random and insignificant.

But science didn't just challenge the traditional worldview; it also challenged the Bible. For instance, the Book of Joshua *says* that the Sun orbits the earth – because Joshua made it stop for a few hours. But science says that's not the way it works. “Are you scientists denying the Word of God?!” Then scientists began digging up fossils of creatures that no one had ever seen or heard of, and which looked to be *way* older than the Bible makes the earth sound. And then, after a while, along came that Darwin guy. And he not only said the earth was millions of years old but suggested that human beings had not appeared suddenly on earth, the work of God in a moment, but rather evolved from earlier creatures and, in fact, were related to modern day apes. This not only contradicts the biblical creation account, but it even further diminishes the uniqueness of humanity. We're related to chimpanzees, just more evolved. Chimps throw feces at each other; we hold elections.

But most disturbing of all, modern science diminished God. We used to know where God was – in the Empyrean, the sphere beyond the stars. Now, in infinite space, where is God? Worse, people used to believe that God was at work throughout creation. Everything that happened that we didn't understand was the finger of God. But science began showing natural causes for these mysteries. Are you sick? It's a virus, not God's punishment. The new scientific world didn't need God as much. A quick example of the clash of worldviews: Benjamin Franklin, as you recall, showed by scientific experiment that lightning consisted of electricity. With that knowledge, he was able to design the lightning rod, which would draw electricity and keep lightning from hitting a building. At least one response to this invention – from a clergyman

– was to condemn it as being against God’s law. How dare you try to stand between God and his ordained punishments? You see the change in worldview there? The clergyman still saw God as immediately responsible for everything major that took place, which of course includes lightning. Franklin saw it as a naturally occurring phenomenon and no more related to the will of God than is the spark that takes place when you touch a doorknob in January.

In short, science and its radical new way of seeking Truth challenged nearly everything. It’s no wonder that in the popular mind science is seen as the enemy of faith. It has sometimes felt that way to those of us in the faith camp. Christians who used to proclaim *Sola Scriptura* – only scripture is authoritative – have seen many of the most common sorts of Truth taken from them. Science simply answers some questions better than religion or the Bible does. I believe in the power of prayer, but a lightning rod protects your house in a thunderstorm more efficiently. Science has given us steam power, the internal combustion engine, air travel, central heating, mass communication, computers, cell phones, vaccines, the internet, and that amazing yellow line that they can somehow project on a football field to show first downs. The Bible can’t do any of that stuff.

Which has led some people to suggest that science does *everything* better, so that we no longer need faith at all. So let’s look at that for a moment. What science and logic and reason do best is explain external things. They offer the sort of Truth that can be known by the conscious mind. For some people, that’s the only sort of Truth that they care about. For these, the types of Truth brought to light by science are all that matter. Most of us, though, find that inadequate. You see, there is also Truth to be found in feelings, in relationships, in art, in imagination. These are not things that we know by thinking about them, but they are real. These are not things that can be tested and proven and explained scientifically, but they are true.

Science can’t explain why we like stories, why at some level we believe that every sequence of events should lead somewhere, should have a meaning. Science can’t explain why as a race we are sure there is a purpose in life, but it’s true. Science can’t explain why a person might leap into traffic, endangering his own life, to save a stranger, but it happens. Nor can science explain why, when we hear about that person who risked his life, we call him a hero and universally affirm that that’s what people ought to be like. Laying down your own life so someone else can live is illogical, irrational, and science is helpless to justify it, but the Bible deals with it at length. Science can explain the mating impulse, but not why we all agree that rape, child molestation, and marital infidelity are wrong. Scripture and tradition can help here, but not science. Science can’t explain the power of art and music. Science can’t explain why humans in all times, in all cultures, have agreed that there is a God (or many gods), a world (or many worlds) beyond this one, and a life (or many lives) after death. The Bible can.

No, I’m *not* saying that science and scientists are immoral. Nor am I saying that religion and people of faith always are. There are too many obvious examples of evil men and women who act in the name of religion, we all know women and men who live lives of compassion and integrity apart from faith. All I’m saying is that everyone who lives such a life finds the source of it from somewhere beyond science. That’s where science hits its limits.

We need to go beyond science. Back to the Teacher of Ecclesiastes. I mentioned that his book is sort of depressing. Well, it is. Having decided to seek meaning in life by the scientific method, having tested different paths and put every other source of Truth aside, he came to the conclusion that . . . everything was meaningless. If science is your only source of Truth, then you have explanations, but not meaning.

I think this is part of what lies behind Paul's caution to the church at Colossae. Don't let yourself be taken captive by "philosophy" – that is, by explanations deriving entirely from this world and known intellectually, he says. Don't live your lives entirely in your minds, because beyond the world of provable realities, beyond the limits of our ability to comprehend and dissect and explain, there is more Truth. And better Truth. That Truth, Paul says, is found in its fullest form in Christ Jesus: God in the flesh, crucified and risen from the dead. It may not make sense, but not every sort of Truth does.