

Sabbath Rest Leads to Acceptance of Abundant Life:

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 and 12:9-14

Today we are continuing our sermon series on Sabbath Rest and if you are thinking goodness, we have heard a lot about Sabbath! You are not wrong. Because today is our sixth Sunday focusing on Sabbath, which may seem like a lot but as an aside, getting to focus on the theme of Sabbath and slowly going through scripture together and sitting with the theological idea of Sabbath has been life giving to me. I have thoroughly enjoyed being challenged from different angles and ideas presented in our scripture. Going into this sermon series I was excited and thought it was a good idea to learn about Sabbath as a congregation while Pastor Scott was on Sabbatical, but, yet again, I have been amazed at the power of Scripture- and specifically reading scripture in community. I realized this week that before this summer series I had a very shallow understanding of Sabbath, but after this sermon series and getting to work with Pastor Jen on this theological idea and spiritual practice, I now have a much more nuanced and in depth understanding of Sabbath.

We have been going chronologically through the Bible. We have looked at Sabbath rest from Creation narratives 1 and 2, the Commandment to remember the Sabbath in the 10 Commandments, the Levitical law about how to practice Sabbath, weekly, yearly, every 7 years, and every 50 years! The idea that Sabbath Rest is the practice of Stopping and Dwelling, to accept what it is and to worship God. And last week Pastor Jen turned to the book of Psalms to examine the way that worship and Sabbath intersect.

Today we are turning a couple of books over to the book of Ecclesiastes. The theme of Sabbath in Ecclesiastes is not as obvious as other passages we have looked at in this summer series. In fact, the word Sabbath is only used one time in the book- and it was not mentioned in either passage we read from today. Rather, we turn to Ecclesiastes to learn less about the practice of Sabbath and more to learn about that which gets in the way of practicing sabbath.

Last week pastor Jen mentioned the “THIS” that is always with us, THIS that is always churning, always pressuring us. **This** is the voice in our head telling us “to get to work, push through”. The voices saying “You can’t rest until the work is done”, “You need to achieve to support yourself, family, community”. **THIS** is the deadlines, schedules, dinner dates, vacations, books on your reading list, the news you need to catch up on, the friends you need to call, the missions or non profits you support, the list of podcasts your friends keep asking if you have listened to, the text messages you haven’t read, the constant dinging of your email. **THE ALL OF THIS** that is hard to name, but the pressure that we all feel. The “THIS” that is what gets in the way of Sabbath Rest.

Which is why we turn to the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes is a book in the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible that is categorized as Wisdom literature. There are three books in the Old Testament considered Wisdom Literature- Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job- each of these books focus on different philosophical questions that arise for people of faith. Proverbs seeks to understand observable wisdom we can know about the world and God. The book of Job asks the question why does Evil happen to good people. And the book of Ecclesiastes asks the questions: what is the purpose of life on earth if nothing is permanent.

Our Scripture Reading this morning opens with:

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,*

vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What do people gain from all the toil

at which they toil under the sun?

The word our translation translates as Vanity is the translation of a Hebrew word that is difficult to translate into English. The Hebrew word is Hevel and its meaning is literally smoke, or vaporous mist (or bubbles like in our children's message) or to use hevel more figuratively, it means absurdity. When the author uses the word Hevel he is saying it is absurd and/or vaporous, our work and toil is like trying to grab hold of smoke or mist. Ecc 1: 14 the author writes *I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is Hevel.... and a chasing after wind...*

The author is setting out from the beginning to ask the question: what is the purpose of it all, all of the THIS that we spend all of our time and thoughts upon, what is it? Is there any meaning to it, or is it all just Hevel; are we all just chasing after a vaporous mist that can never actually be grasped.

Crawford and I often spend our free time watching documentaries, for whatever reason that is one of our favorite pastimes, and last week we watched a documentary series about Sean White- an Olympic Athlete who has been to five Olympics and has won 3 gold medals. I'll be honest with you, we watched the documentary because this is one of the few docs left for us to watch (I'm not a huge snowboarding fan) but it was interesting to hear Sean reflect on his achievements. After winning his second Gold medal-and being at the top of his game he realized that it wasn't enough; he still felt this sense of emptiness and need to pursue more athletic (literal) heights. He only felt as good as his next accomplishment and no matter how much he achieved it never filled him (I don't think Sean White is unique in this- this is a sentiment that many who achieve a lot often experience). Which I think is what Ecclesiastes is getting at, no matter our pursuits, no matter how much we achieve it's all Hevel, a mist that we are attempting to grab and hold on to, but it is not able to be grasped. *For all things under the sun shall pass away, it is here today and gone tomorrow*, and if we place all meaning and purpose on the Hevel we will live in the absurdity.

The word hevel is used throughout this short book over 28 times and the author is attempting to reconcile the tension between our work and struggles in this life and the

absurdity that nothing lasts forever; everything has but just a season and all things are passing away.

*What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?*

⁴ *A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

⁵ *The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.*

All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.*

⁹ *What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.*

You may be thinking to yourself, well this is depressing! Why would this book even be in the Bible and you would not be alone in those thoughts. This book has had a long history of debate about its inclusion in the biblical canon in both Hebrew and Christian history. In our reading from the end of Ecclesiastes in Chapter 12, we are told The sayings of the wise are like goads, Goad meaning the tool of a shepherd that would poke or prod animals to move, or goad means to provoke or annoy someone as to get a reaction out of them. So there is a certain self-awareness to this book of the bible that it is hoping to provoke its reader. The author wants the reader to feel so irritated or annoyed that they change. He has a pedagogy irritation.

I think the beauty of Ecclesiastes is that this book ultimately teaches us about humility and being open to receiving all that God has for us. Ellen Davis, biblical Scholar and author states "What Ecclesiastes aims to instill in its readers is the ability to receive the pleasures of life as the gift they are and to recognize God as sole Giver." To reconcile the absurdity of life is to be open to all the gifts that God gives throughout our lifetime, and not to be fooled into thinking we are the ones in control. The word "give" also occurs twenty-eight times in Ecclesiastes, and most often the one who gives is God. The essential message of Ecclesiastes, then, is "Receive the gift? Acceptant the abundant life God is giving to you.

Ecc 8:5 ⁵So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

While preparing for this sermon I kept thinking about my husband Crawford and his journey, and I got his permission to share this story. In 2005 Crawford had just graduated from Tulane University in New Orleans with a degree in Philosophy and spent his summer preparing to attend Princeton Seminary in the coming fall. Crawford had a plane ticket scheduled for August 29th, 2005, and you may or may not know the significance of that date, but August 29th 2005 is the day that hurricane Katrina made landfall over the city of New Orleans. Obviously, his flight that day was canceled but the winds of hurricane Katrina reoriented his life in a way

that was unexpected. Crawford and his sibling had evacuated to his parent's home in Shreveport, Louisiana and in the aftermath of the storm became involved with helping the thousands of evacuees needing shelter and reprieve after the levees broke in New Orleans. Crawford remembers feeling stuck between the plans he had made for himself and responding to the crisis unfolding before him. He felt called to stay and help and everyone in his life was encouraging him to not stay in Louisiana, but to move on with his plans to go to seminary. He remembers an important conversation with his grandmother, who affirmed his call to stay and help, Crawford made the unpopular decision to hold his own plans loosely. He deferred seminary and stayed in Louisiana where he worked for a nonprofit helping to collect the stories of people who had lost everything when the Levees broke. This change of plans and responding to the moment rather than grasping tightly his plans for the future ultimately changed his life. He reflected to me this week that this experience reshaped his life in many ways and is why he is a chaplain now.

The message of Ecclesiastes is that we are not in control of life, it is an illusion or vaporous smoke to think that we are. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is to hold things with an open hand and enjoy whatever gift God sends our way. Ecclesiastes tells us to choose to accept both the good things and the bad because both are rich gifts from God.

So, How might Ecclesiastes help us to practice Sabbath?

First, I think Ecclesiastes helps us to put in perspective the THIS that interrupts us from fully making rest and worship a priority. The pursuit of Hevel is fleeting, and having a full perspective on the fleeting nature of human existence can help soothe our anxieties and allow us to stop and dwell in this present moment. Having perspective on the fleeting nature of all that is pressuring us, allows us to choose more freely to stop, dwell, and worship God.

Secondly, Ecclesiastes encourages us to remain open to Life's Ambiguities. Ecclesiastes acknowledges the uncertainties and paradoxes of life. When we embrace life's ambiguities, we learn to let go of the need to control every aspect of our existence. Sabbath rest allows us to release our worries and anxieties, trusting that God holds the greater plan and purpose for our lives.

Ecclesiastes also encourages us to cultivate Gratitude: The book of Ecclesiastes encourages us to find joy and contentment in simple pleasures rather than constantly seeking more. Sabbath rest offers a time to practice gratitude for the blessings we have.

Finally, we can learn from Ecclesiastes the importance of humility, acknowledging the Limitations of Human Wisdom. Sabbath rest reminds us to trust in God's wisdom and guidance, acknowledging that we don't have all the answers. Surrendering our need for control and relying on God's wisdom brings peace during our Sabbath rest.

Please Join me in prayer...

Gracious God,

As we embark on the journey of Sabbath rest, Lord, guide us to embrace the fullness of our rest. Help us to step away from the busyness and distractions that consume our lives, that we may find rest in Your presence. Grant us the wisdom to relinquish our worries and anxieties, knowing that You hold the greater plan for our lives. As we rest, teach us to trust in Your divine wisdom and to seek Your guidance in all aspects of our existence. Fill our hearts with gratitude, O Lord, for the blessings You have bestowed upon us. May our Sabbath rest be a time of joyful reflection, as we thank You for the simple pleasures and the richness of Your grace. In the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who is our true rest and peace, Amen.