

For Those Who Worry

**Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14
and 2:18-23
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In his novel, "The Clowns of God," Morris West portrays the return of Christ, showing him cradling in his arms a child who has the debilitating condition Down's syndrome. Christ is serving her the bread and wine of Communion, saying, "I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you – eternal innocence." "She will never offend me as all of you have done. She will never pervert or destroy the works of my Father's hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that 'I AM WHO I AM.'"¹

"Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." In making that statement, Ecclesiastes, which is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, rejects the notion that a child with Down's syndrome has any significance, because he rejects any human endeavor or lack-there-of as having significance, meaning, intrinsic worth. Solomon says, "I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven, ... and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind."

The search for meaning in life.... We can all relate to that. For some people, they derive meaning from what they know, what they can learn. The pursuit of knowledge gives their life meaning. Others derive meaning from their work, the value they add as a member of a team, the money they make, the wealth and awards they accumulate, the things they can buy, the people they impress. Still others struggle hopelessly to find meaning in life. They go through one day after another wondering what's it all about, what's it all worth, why are they here. And in the end, they fall into despair with no sense of purpose.

And then there are those whose purpose seems to be worrying about things – the state of this nation we live in, the stability of international relations, the climate, senseless violence, homelessness, addiction and poverty, not to mention worries closer to home, such as job security, household finances, your never-ending list of chores and errands, and, of course, health issue – either your own or the health of friends and loved ones. So much to worry about, so much to be responsible for. It's no wonder we struggle in life.

If only we were more healthy, had more money, fewer responsibilities, a better job; if only this country was in better shape, the nations more peaceful and cooperative – then we could be sure that all is well and our worries would cease, our happiness would be assured, and our joy would be shared throughout our families, among our neighbors, and across the globe.

¹ As quoted by Diane M. Komp, "Hearts Untroubled," *Theology Today*, 45 1988, 273-279.

It's a nice thought. But Ecclesiastes challenges this thought, saying, "All is vanity," which is to say, all is meaningless. Solomon, as the king of Israel, had access to whatever money he needed, whatever knowledge existed, whatever leisure and freedom it took to search out the answer to the meaning of life, and he discovered that, by-and-large, our lives are meaningless, at least when measured by all we accomplish.

Do you aspire to know all things and have unlimited power, wealth and resources? Don't bother, says Solomon. It is "an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with." Of course God did not mean for us to know all things and have unlimited power, wealth and resources. That was our idea, going all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden. And such aspirations never work out well.

Take for example the wealthy and powerful businessman who came to believe he could do anything he set his mind to. One weekend, on a whim, he rented a large sailboat, even though he had never sailed a day in his life. But he had read a book about sailing and decided he could master the basics all by himself. Confidently, he sailed the boat out of the harbor and was soon far from land. Suddenly, a dark cloud appeared on the horizon, and before he knew it, he was in the middle of a terrible storm, with the boat pitching and rolling. Realizing he was in trouble, the businessman switched on the radio and called the Coast Guard. The first question they asked was, "What is your position?" to which the man replied, "Vice president of sales and recruitment." Not the answer they wanted.

Do you aspire to know all things and have unlimited power, wealth and resources? Don't bother, says Solomon. Or maybe you aspire to live a long and fruitful life so that you might at last find meaning in that? Don't bother, says Solomon. "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?"

Solomon's issue here is that he's lived a long and fruitful life and he knows that someday he must die. And on that day all he will have to show for it is the fruit of his labor, which someone else will then possess, whether or not they have the smarts and work ethic to do it justice. So Solomon despairs, saying, "... They will be master of all for which I toiled...." If only he could live forever and control the outcome and destiny of his life's work. But of course he can't, and so Solomon decides that fixating on his own life and death is also vanity, meaningless.

Next, Solomon says, "I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors ..., because ... one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it." With this realization, Solomon falls into despair. And of course, once there, he concludes that this, too, "is vanity and a great evil."

In other words, if you're sitting around thinking your life has no meaning, and wondering if, in the end, it will amount to anything, give it up. Such a state of despair is meaningless; it gets you nowhere. Having it all gets you nowhere, being obsessed about dying gets you nowhere, and falling into despair about it gets you nowhere.

And then there is worry. We all know about worry and where that gets you. And so does Solomon. "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?" he says. "For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." After being consumed by worry, with restless nights, Solomon concluded, "This also is vanity." All the worrying we do about anything and everything is meaningless. Having it all is meaningless, being concerned about dying is meaningless, falling into despair is meaningless and worrying about it is meaningless. And yet, there is one phrase in what Solomon writes that points to the true meaning of life. When Solomon asks, "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain," he gives us the key to the meaning of life.

The key to the meaning of life is to turn that question around. Instead of asking what do mortals get, we must ask what do they give, what do we give. The value and meaning of a person's life is not in what they get, but rather, what they give.

So many people worry about so many things, and yet they are given so much, they control so little, and they truly need of nothing that God has not already provided. We are blessed to be people of faith, as was Solomon. Solomon concludes the Book of Ecclesiastes saying, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind."

Only God, and God alone, is the judge of our worth, of your worth. It is God who gives meaning to your life. So live your life as a child of God, in service to your neighbor wherever he or she is found, and don't worry; leave it all in God's hands.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, we praise you for having bound humanity in a great unity of life, so that each must lean on the strength of all, and depend for comfort and safety on the help and labor of brothers and sisters.

We ask your blessing on all the men and women who have toiled to build and warm our homes, fashion our clothing and harvest from sea and land the food that nourishes us and our children. We pray that they may have health and joy, and hope and love, even as we desire this for our loved ones.

Grant us wisdom to deal justly with everyone we meet in our daily lives. May we not unknowingly inflict suffering through selfish indifference or the willful ignorance of a callous heart.

We pray, O Lord, for those for whom life has become difficult, and especially for those in need of your healing touch. We pray, also, your spirit of comfort and care for those with debilitating conditions.

All this we pray in the powerful name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who brings us into community with one another, and in whose name we raise our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**