

This sermon was preached on Sunday, September 12, 2010, at Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church, West Bend, Wisconsin. The setting was an afternoon Celebration of Ministry service that marked the new school year at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School as well as noting two instructors' ministry anniversaries (40 & 25 years) and the installation of a new instructor. Pastor Paustian serves as one of two full-time pastors at Good Shepherd.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV) "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

If you're thinking this is not exactly the best text for an anniversary in the teaching ministry or the beginning of one, you're right. Actually it's not even the best text in this chapter. That would be verse 11: **There is no remembrance of men of old [that would be you, Jerry, and especially you, Dan], and even those who are yet to come [and that would be you, April] will not be remembered by those who follow.**

Our text sounds like the words of a teacher who's finished. If this were a syllabus, the school year would have to be incredibly short. "Class, pay careful attention, because what I'm about to say is absolutely pointless!" But these are the words of a teacher who has found a fresh start. He addresses realities that have to be addressed if ministry is to continue, yes, if it's going to be what it is meant to be in the first place.

Solomon has wandered through some dark territory and made some painful discoveries about the deceptive nature of sin. His book of Ecclesiastes gives us the wisdom to recognize and understand places we've been and confronts us with the sort of spiritual realities that drive us to search for and cling to...

The Message That Gives Ministry Meaning

Solomon had looked for meaning, for significance in accomplishments and pleasure, in the sheer joy of wisdom, and in possessions. He laid out his plan and pursued it with wisdom and skill and dedication. But he couldn't avoid the gnawing sense that everything came up empty.

Endless repetition, nothing new under the sun and this from a teacher who didn't have to do correcting. Unpredictable results of skilled effort, the injustice that the race is not always to the swift or those most skilled, like a soccer game that ends in a shootout. Build something with skill only to have to hand it off to someone who will ruin it.

Solomon recognized the problem of eternity, that God has made everything beautiful in its time. There's a sword hidden in these words. God has surrounded us with beautiful things we want to hold onto, but their beauty is for a time, for a limited time. You may not have to look very far to identify something of great beauty to you and remember the bitter taste of it falling apart.

The message that gives ministry meaning is first of all a message that makes us hungry, by confronting us with our emptiness. God has set eternity in your heart—in every heart; this is not a matter of belief or unbelief! It is the recognition that sin has thrown something vital away, which now lies beyond our reach or our recovering. It doesn't know what was in the hole, just that there is a gaping hole in what we are. God has set eternity in your heart. That is how Solomon explains that sense you have that if something is not perfect and permanent, it is not good enough, because you will be you for all eternity. You are eternal and it will not work for you to rely on something that isn't eternal.

The emptiness that Solomon confronts is the emptiness, the complete vanity of life under the sun, that is, life without God in the picture. His book of Ecclesiastes is not the product of a pessimistic, depressed soul. It's a profound preaching of the Law.

This is a message that needs to be heard by the gifted student or teacher who seems capable of accomplishing much under the sun and by the student whose gifts seem limited. This is a message that needs to be heard by the skeptics around us who say "life has no meaning!" but don't realize how right they are and so don't expect us to agree with them. Since they deny the existence of God, they are saying that all there is is life under the sun and we shouldn't be surprised they find it empty. You can't find life apart from God.

Sin means that any of us can find emptiness anywhere, even in the ministry. After all, even Solomon, with all the wisdom God gave him, had found a way to bring emptiness into his rule as king of the chosen people.

Comment [g1]: There is room in Lutheran preaching for an appropriate use of humor. Not telling of jokes, but humor. As Fred Craddock has remarked, no one is taken more seriously than someone who is always serious.

Comment [g2]: Notice how Pastor Paustian introduces the malady (specific law) of the sermon enough to capture our attention and interest on what these painful discoveries might be, but he does not give everything away by giving us a complete "abstract" of the problem in the introduction. We have reason to accompany him into the exposition of the text.

Comment [g3]: Notice the beauty and symmetry of the language used here. Notice in particular the threefold repetition of similar prepositional phrases to give us a summary of all of Ecclesiastes.

Such threefold repetitions are common features of spoken rhetoric since it depends on purposeful repetition to highlight and drive home key points. Two parts often have a feel of too little, and four or more can easily become pedantic. In classical rhetoric such repetition was called "anaphora."

Comment [g4]: One of the celebrants that day was a long time soccer coach, the other assists with track. The preacher clearly had done some thinking not only about his text but also about his hearers.

Comment [g5]: There is elegance of expression found here in the alliteration that makes this succinct summary of Ecclesiastes memorable.

Comment [g6]: This is good specific preaching of the malady to specific groups of people gathered for this celebration of ministry service.

Just one thought on style: Would it have been more memorable and easier to process if the pattern of repetition had been used even more here? What if the first sentence had ended with "...under the sun" and a new sentence had begun: "This is a message that needs to be heard by the student..."? Wouldn't the first two thoughts have been aided if each stood alone in their own simpler sentence rather than being joined into a very complex single sentence? Such simpler sentence structure is often one key difference between writing for the eye and preaching for the ear.

The sinful nature within us is willing to do what looks like the work of ministry, looking to latch on to some bit of glory for us here and now, some temporary treasure. But if we're trying to learn or build or accomplish for our own glory, we're seeking to accomplish something temporary, and isn't it strange that we can still be surprised that the desired results, even when we achieve them, are just that, temporary? We taste that bitter emptiness. Or we find that our pursuit of our goals is that chasing after the wind Solomon describes, that never finds anything solid to latch onto.

Sounds like the recipe for a long, pointless school year. If it's all we have to say then the right conclusion is "why bother?" But if we have something more to say, then we realize that Solomon's unblinking judgment demonstrates the urgency of our ministry.

What does God say to us who have tasted the emptiness of sin, the emptiness of looking for life apart from him? Listen to this reminder from his servant Peter: **For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from**—and here the good Lutheran is ready to say, "sin, death and the power of the devil," but Peter wrote, **you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,**¹⁹ **but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.** [1 Peter 1:18-19]

No event in all of history looked more empty than the end of Christ's ministry, but Good Friday was not the end of any hope of anything good to say. No it was just the beginning. Through the blood of the eternal covenant you have been redeemed, set free from the empty way of life. Redeemed from something empty, redeemed for something full. The Gospel connects you to Christ the living vine, so that his life flows into you and produces fruit, fruit that will last, fruit that will be remembered. It's the easily overlooked fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control. The world looks to build something bigger and doesn't see what a big difference these Christ-like attitudes make in everyday life.

Ministry that points to Christ naturally imitates and reflects Christ and produces accomplishments that are eternal. When Solomon said, **There is no remembrance of men of old**, that was, like our text, a preaching of Law. Christ our Savior tells us he will remember the love shown to those whom the world views as insignificant around us. We are told to remember. **As for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of, because you know those from whom you have learned it...**

This celebration of ministry has led me to remember Hertha and Ada. Hertha was my fourth grade teacher, very kind. Ada was my 5th grade and piano teacher. She didn't succeed at the piano part, but she did teach me how to write. Usually 500 times, occasionally 1000 times! "I will not..." For those of you who don't know they were the Sievert sisters, who taught at St. Mark's in Watertown. I'm sure you've known and remember servants of Christ like them.

You've been entrusted with the message that gives ministry meaning. What you have done and what you will do for Christ will be remembered. Know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain, not by obvious results but because **the One we serve and seek to honor, the One whose blood sanctifies our service lives and reigns, whose gifts are perfect and permanent**

The battle is not over yet. If Satan can't convince us that what is empty—life without God—is full, he'll work to convince us that what is full—a life of Christian service—is empty. The conviction that what you do for Christ is not empty or wasted is a confidence of faith, because the results are often hidden or slow in coming.

Under the sun, everything is meaningless. That tells you that you have nothing to live for. But you are no longer living under the sun. **You've met Jesus, the Christ. Live for him!**

Comment [g7]: This is a well crafted transition that begins to rescue us from the despair of the emptiness of life lived apart from God to the hope only the gospel can give.

Notice also that Pastor Paustian hasn't given a complete abstract of the rest of the sermon. He gives clear direction where we are going, but he waits to bring us along as the gospel hope develops in the rest of the sermon. Such anticipation is often crucial to helping the hearers stay engaged in the sermon. Too often we give too much away, thereby almost removing any reason to continue to listen. We might as well say "Amen."

Comment [g8]: The use of rhetorical questions is an often neglected tool in preaching. It invites hearers to participate in the preaching of the sermon. It asks them to think along with the one speaking. It hides the monologue nature of preaching and creates a sense of dialogue.

In particular, rhetorical questions can be useful, as Pastor Paustian uses it here, to lead into the reading of a key verse of the text or a key supporting verse from elsewhere in Scripture.

Rhetorical questions can also be excellent tools to transition between paragraphs.

Comment [g9]: Notice how well Pastor Paustian almost leads us into what can become a mindless repetition of familiar words, but then points us to how beautifully Peter's inspired words answer specifically the specific malady presented by the text. How critical to imitate the rich variety of the ways that Scripture knows how to preach the gospel—and to match the language and imagery of the text. The sermon is not part of the ordinary. It is a part of the proper!

Comment [g10]: Here's another helpful repetition that bind the paragraph together.

Comment [g11]: Ponder the wisdom of the inclusion of this brief personal remembrance! This is being spoken at a celebration of ministry service for those who may indeed often wonder whether what they do matters. And while we are to live by faith that gospel ministry does matter, there are times God also grants us a bit of sight—often in hindsight! Here the preacher remembers with thanksgiving to God—and with a bit of humor—those whom God used to serve him! Notice in the next two paragraphs how Pastor Paustian picks up both on the encouragement of a bit of sight as well as reminding us that we live by faith in meaningfulness of public ministry.

Comment [g12]: Here one final "the One" would seem to allow the third part of the repetition ("the One...the One") to have the same distinct emphasis as the first two.

Comment [g13]: Would it have made use of the language of the text even more if this sentence would have been, "You live under the Son!"? The point is this. Every text presents us with its own unique "language" for speaking law and gospel. As we will pick up in the second key issue of this series, learning to speak that text's language is a critical issue of freshness and variety in law and gospel. This sermon has captured that in abundance! This is one small place where it might have captured it just a bit more.