

Sermon for Zion, Sunday September 16, 2018

Hymns: 378 – Jesus in the morning; I surrender all; You are my all in all;

376 – Shine, Jesus Shine

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:12-14; 2:1-11; John 1:9-18; John 18:33-38

Sermon Title: “Is There More to Life Than This?”

*Ecclesiastes 1:12-14; 2:1-11 (New Living Translation)*

*I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven... I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind.*

*I said to myself, “Come on, let’s try pleasure. Let’s look for the ‘good things’ in life.” But I found that this, too, was meaningless. So I said, “Laughter is silly. What good does it do to seek pleasure?” After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world.*

*I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!*

*So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.*

*John 1:9-18 New International Version (NIV)*

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...*

*Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*

*John 18:33-38 New International Version (NIV)*

*Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"*

*"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"*

*"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"*

*Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."*

*"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.*

*Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."*

*"What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him."*

Is there more to life than this? Is life more than what we accumulate, what we consume, what we acquire? Is life just about a collection of momentary pleasures, about having a good time, about drinking the cup dry? Is life about status, prestige, wealth? Is the meaning of life measured by our bank account, by our pension plan, by our investment portfolio? Is that where we find meaning? Did Hugh Hefner have it right – the one who dies with the most bunnies wins? Or is there more to life than that?

Hugh Hefner isn't around to ask anymore, but there's a book in the Bible written by a guy with even more bunnies than Hugh – the Book of Ecclesiastes. Written either by or about King Solomon, Ecclesiastes has a surprisingly cynical, pessimistic, fatalistic view of the world, from the perspective of a guy who had it all – wealth, power, property, and bunnies by the score – some 900 wives and concubines, says the Bible, a number which puts even old Hugh in the shade.

And what is the writer's conclusion? Same as his introduction – *“Meaningless,”* he says. *“It was all meaningless. As I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless - like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.”* If that's all there is – if the world is just a material product, if all we are is flesh and bone, if all we can see and touch and taste and grab is all there is, then where can meaning be found? “I had everything,” said the writer. “And I spent my life looking for meaning. And in everything I had and everything I did and everything I saw, I didn't find it. And neither will you. And not only that, we're all going to die in the end, and a hundred years from now, we'll all be long gone and forgotten anyway.”

You can hear the emptiness. The world, to the weary, burned-out writer of Ecclesiastes - to old, exhausted Solomon - must have seemed a meaningless cycle; a dark and empty place. Must, for many today, still seem so. Ecclesiastes ends in cynical despair.

And then, some 900 years after King Solomon closed his book and breathed his last, something happened. In the midst of the darkness of our world came Jesus Christ. John, grasping for words to explain the wonder of it all, calls Jesus *“The Word,”* by which he means the creative power of God, the Source behind all creation, the full expression of the being and person of God, the true reality behind all we see and know, behind the universe itself:

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

*“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.”* The darkness of meaningless existence, the inability to find the answer to life's mystery, the searching without finding, was suddenly illuminated by the light of heaven itself, a light which came to birth in a Bethlehem stable, which grew and brightened in Nazareth, which emerged from the Jordan river to the heavens ringing with the voice of God – *“This is my beloved Son”* – this light, this grace, this truth, came into our world, in the person of Jesus Christ.

The very existence of Jesus is proof that there is something more, there is more to life than what we see and touch and acquire. The writer of Ecclesiastes, as many as 900 years before Jesus was born, could guess at it, hint at it – that there is

a God, and that somehow, there is perhaps meaning in acknowledging God, and seeking to live in that awareness – but in Jesus, here was God in the flesh, God among us, God with us, God in our form, God in clarity, God in a way we could grasp, could experience, could hear.

And what did we hear?

That there is a kingdom – a reality – beyond this world, much greater than this world. It is the Kingdom of God, and this Kingdom is now among you. There is meaning, there is purpose, there is hope, and it is found in and through Jesus Christ, God’s full expression of grace, of truth, of love.

The lives we now live – lives of futility, of frustration, of disappointment, of sin – our lives can be made new, be given a fresh start, can be born again, reborn from above, by the very power of God, living in us, within us, through us.

The pursuits and pleasures of life – the path to meaning so fruitlessly pursued by the writer of Ecclesiastes – are gifts of God, for our blessing and enjoyment, but are not where meaning and purpose are to be found. Fullness of life, fullness of joy, true freedom, can be found in joining our lives with the life of Christ, in following him as Saviour and Lord. For as we do, we exchange our citizenship in this world bereft of meaning - this world where all things ultimately crumble, wither, die - to citizenship in the Kingdom of God, that place where, as the Scriptures proclaim (Revelation 21),

*God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

*He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

“*These words are trustworthy and true.*” That’s the astonishing thing. The life, the words, the teaching, the miracles, the death, the resurrection of Jesus, all affirm the deep, absolute truth of the message of the Gospel: There is a reality, a meaning, a truth far greater beyond that which we see. The pleasures of life are only that – pleasures – which last but a moment, and are gone. Their truth is

illusory, fleeting. Beauty, wealth, health, possessions – they are at best, temporary. But the truth of God is eternal. It is where meaning – where truth - is to be found.

Which is why Jesus said (John 8:31), *“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

Which is why Jesus also said (John 14:6), *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

We began our sermon in the Jerusalem of 930 BC, in the palace of Solomon. Let me now bring you to the Jerusalem of 30 AD, to the judgement hall of Pontius Pilate, Roman Governor of Judea. Standing before him is Jesus. Jesus has been accused by the frightened, scheming religious authorities of blasphemy, about which Pilate does not care, and treason against the State, about which he does. Just like the religious authorities, Pilate is hopelessly out of his depth with Jesus, who is speaking of a reality far greater than Pilate can grasp. The Bible lets us in on this astonishing conversation (John 18):

*Pilate said, “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”*

*Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”*

*“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.*

*Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”*

*“What is truth?” retorted Pilate.*

*“What is truth?”* Pilate, you see, is stuck in “Ecclesiastes mode.” Pilate had power, money, prestige. Pilate had all the ancient world could offer – he was a big man, a top official in the most powerful empire the world had ever known. And yet he sees the meaninglessness beneath it all. “What is truth?” he cynically asks, sounding for all the world like a member of the Trump administration, tired of all the “fake news” and “alternative facts” and cynical manipulations of public opinion. “What is truth,” indeed. Pilate asks the question at the heart of it all. Does such a thing as truth, as meaning, even exist anymore?

And Jesus answers. He says, *“In fact, the very reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.”* What is truth to which Jesus testifies? The

truth is, there is a God. That God loves you. That God is to us a Father, and the Father is calling you home, in forgiveness, in mercy, in grace. The Father (says Jesus) has sent me to show you the way. *“I am the way, the truth, the life.”*

“Is there more to life than this? Or is it all meaningless?” That’s the question with which we began. And the only true answer is Jesus Christ. For in Jesus, and only in Jesus, can truth be found; can meaning be found; can purpose, destiny, a hopeful present, a sure future be found. *“It is,”* says Jesus, *“the very reason I was born.”* And the very reason you were born, too.

“Is there more to life than this? Or is it all meaningless?” Is that your question? Is that where you are? Then I invite you – I implore you – to join your life with the life of Christ. To follow him as Saviour and Lord. To become a citizen of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom based not upon the cynical manipulation of power and the distortion of truth, but based upon the freedom of living in love and the source of all truth. Know what it means to have fullness of life now, and the promise of life eternal. Experience the release of forgiveness, the power to forgive others. Feel and know the love of God, and be given courage to reach out in love to all our world. Find meaning in, and the purpose for, your life. Know the truth, and be set free.

*“If you hold to my teaching, (said Jesus,) you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

*“...these words are trustworthy and true.”*

Amen.