

25 October 2020

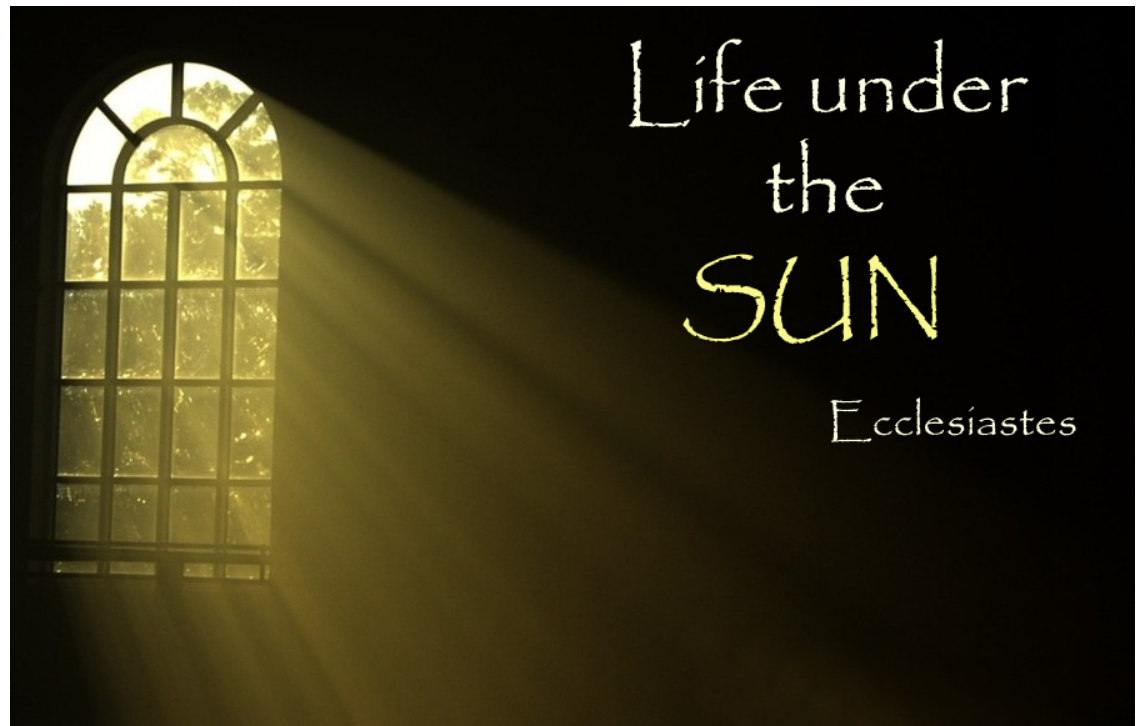
Ecclesiastes 1:2-11; 2:12-26

It's all Vapour!

First Mennonite Church

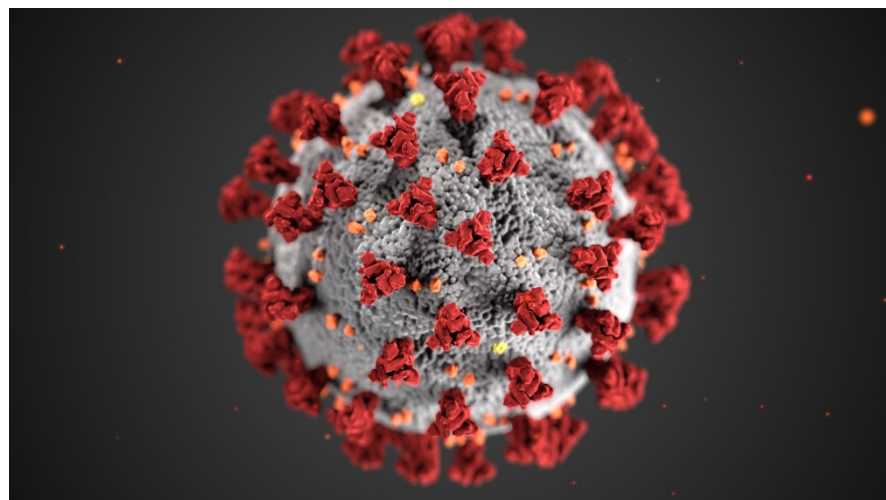
I told a friend the other day that I was working on an uplifting and hopeful three-part sermon series on Ecclesiastes. He laughed, and remarked, "good luck with that!"

Ecclesiastes is not a book that entices you with pleasant words. Many consider Ecclesiastes a very depressing and hopeless book. At



first glance, that seems to be true. Ecclesiastes has about as much cheeriness as an undertaker, as much joyousness as a dirge.

I was drawn to Ecclesiastes, in large part, because of Covid-19. I've been struck by how a microscopic virus created a global health crisis. It has rapidly spread around the world, posing enormous health, economic,



environmental and social challenges to the entire human population. It is killing people, spreading human suffering, and upending people's lives. The virus is

severely disrupting everything from the global economy to family gatherings, from funerals to travel. Almost all the nations are struggling to slow down the transmission of the disease by testing and treating patients, quarantining suspected persons through contact tracing, restricting large gatherings, and maintaining complete or partial lock downs.

One day we're visiting, going for coffee, meeting in restaurants, travelling to different places—and poof—the next day we can't. One day cruise ships are full of patrons, planes are full of travellers, restaurants and gyms are busy, businesses are thriving—and poof—the next day they aren't. One day the German Cultural



Centre, The Little Bird Pâtisserie & Café, and The Awl Shoppe are thriving—and poof—the next day, they're gone, evaporated just like the mist coming out of this humidifier and disappearing.

Can we find meaning and purpose when everything is turned upside down? Where is God in all of this? What it is like for you living under the sun?

Probably the most familiar passage in Ecclesiastes is the time poem:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;*

And it goes on to talk about a time for this and a time for that. Have you ever noticed the last line in verse 5? It says,

*a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing (Ecclesiastes 3:5).*

I never understood this portion “a time to refrain from embracing” until Covid-19. We are in a time where we refrain from embracing.

Though we were closed for in-person worship for 6 months, we are now back together for Sunday morning worship, but certainly not like it used to be. We now wear masks, are in a season where we aren't embracing each other but are keeping our distance. We're not visiting in the foyer or holding adult education

classes. Even simple things like how to celebrate communion, safely run Forever in Motion, hold church meetings are suddenly big and complicated issues!

What does this all mean? Where is God in all of this? I was drawn to Ecclesiastes, perhaps not so much for answers as for questions, not for solace but for companionship. Yet, I found some comfort in knowing that I'm not alone in my bewilderment and questioning. Ecclesiastes also struggled to know where God was at work, sought to address the dark side of faith and human existence.

I chose as an overarching theme for this sermon series, "Life under the sun." What is life like under the sun? As Christians, we obviously affirm the joy and peace given in Christ, but we're also aware that faith doesn't shield us, protect us from the turmoil of life. This is why I want to focus this sermon series on Ecclesiastes.

One of the keys words in Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word, hebel (הֶבֶל). Many English translations of Ecclesiastes, like the NRSV and KJV open with the words:

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

Note how different other versions of the Bible translate this opening verse. The New International Version says,

*"Meaningless! Meaningless!"  
says the Teacher.  
"Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless."*

New English Bible translates verse 2 the following way:

*"Futile! Futile!" laments the Teacher.  
"Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!"*

In his paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson chooses the somewhat colloquial **smoke**.

*Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That's what the Quester says.]  
There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke.*

How one translates and understands the meaning of this word has a profound impact on how you understand the overall message of Ecclesiastes. I think it's unfortunate that the NIV uses the word meaningless. Other poor choices are absurd, useless, and futility. While I admit that Ecclesiastes does have sober and

critical things to say about life under the sun, to translate consistently with such terms suggests that Ecclesiastes' message is more negative and despairing than is actually the case.

In my research, I found hebel can also be translated as vapour, mist, or breath. In the book of Job, Job says, "my life is a breath (Job 7:7). The Hebrew word used here is hebel. Psalm 39:5 says, "Surely everyone stands as a mere breath." Again, the Hebrew word is hebel. This Hebrew word, hebel, has to do with things which are real, yet are hard to get your hands on, because it's so elusive. Hebel comes and goes and doesn't last long. It's transitory, fleeting, and short-lived. When you go outside in the cold and breathe out, you can see your breath for an instant, but then suddenly it's gone. This is hebel.

This Hebrew word, hebel, is a metaphor for what it's like to live under the sun. Hebel is vapour, mist, or breath. It's transitory and brief. It comes and goes.

There are fireplace TV channels that give a warm cozy feel to a family gathering. I'm using a vaporizer to remind you of this word, hebel. Everything in the world is transitory, fleeting, and short-lived. It's like mist or vapour. You can see the mist appear and disappear, see it come and go.

Ecclesiastes uses the metaphor of vapour in several different ways.

**First, Ecclesiastes says somethings are vapour because they are empty and futile.** For example, *what do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun*, asks the author? Human effort is vapour because ultimately, we have **nothing to show for it.**



Years ago, there was a Peanuts cartoon that showing Linus working hard on the beach, constructing a large and elaborate sandcastle. A few frames later, it begins to rain, eventually pouring down so heavily that the castle is completely washed away. And the punchline is, “there’s a lesson to be learned here, but I don’t know what it is...”

I remember working on a sermon sometime ago. I had put a lot of work into it. One day I had some computer issues and lost the entire file. All that work, gone. Like those people who put time, energy, and money into their businesses only to see them go under because of a

virus. Vapour. It’s all vapour.

**Second, somethings are vapour because they are foul.** Like breath that can be



foul, especially in the morning, so too are things like evil and sickness foul. Examples of this are wealth being passed on to a fool, wealth that can’t be enjoyed, injustice, the fact that everyone eventually dies, and compulsive toil that brings no satisfaction.

I can relate to toil that brings no satisfaction. After I graduated from High School, I didn’t know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. So, I went and got a job in home construction. I hated it. I remember one day eating my lunch at the construction site, and from my vantage point, I was able to watch all the high school students on their lunch break. And I thought to myself: I spent 12 years in school for this—a meaningless job in construction? (While it was a pointless job for me, it’s not a pointless job; there are many construction workers who love their work!)

Ecclesiastes is full of paradox contradictions, and ambiguities that have long puzzled readers. In the search for wisdom, the teacher realizes that death will come to both the wise and the foolish, and so asks, why then have I been so very wise? And I said to myself that this is also vapour.

This seems a cruel truth: it is better to be wise than foolish, but hey, we both end up dying anyway. Why bother then to be wise? Isn't it better to live by the mantra, "ignorance is bliss?"

The very things about Ecclesiastes that make us scratch our heads in puzzlement may be its very point: much about life leaves us puzzled, dismayed, disappointed. Ecclesiastes is validating our experience, especially in times of grief disorientation, pain, grief, doubt, and disappointment.

**Finally, some things are vapour because they are short-lived.** One of the major themes in Ecclesiastes is this word, vapour. The other overriding theme is human mortality. Life is short, fleeting, like vapour or mist: the generations come and the generations go. We come, we go, time marches on, leaving us behind. To be human is to be aware of our mortality. A potential storehouse of wisdom exists in recognizing our mortality, in acknowledging the fact that this life doesn't go on forever. I plan to focus on this theme next week.

Thus, Ecclesiastes is able to use a single image, vapour, to describe a variety of experiences with which humans must come to terms. He employs vapour as a puzzle that challenges us to engage his teaching: how can all be vapour?

What are we as Christians to do with the wisdom of Ecclesiastes?



# Table Talk:

*Does the Church still have legs?*

MENNONITE CHURCH CANADA  
STUDY CONFERENCE 2020

Yesterday, I participated in an online study conference, put on by MC Canada. The theme of the conference was *Table Talk: Does the Church still have legs?* The different speakers and our small group discussion revolved around two questions: 1. What does it mean to be the church, and 2. What is the role of worship.

Since we are in the middle of a pandemic, much of the small group discussion revolved around the question how we can be the church in the middle of a pandemic. Truth be told, I was inspired by the speakers and the discussion, not because there were clear answers, but ironically, because there were none.

Some said the virus pandemic was like an earthquake that had shaken us all up. Others talked about all the problems the pandemic created, including loss of sleep, mental health issues, anxiety about donations and funding of institutions, conflict, anger, and despair. Some mentioned a desire to return to normal, but recognized that it wasn't possible. Everyone acknowledged that there was no playbook for how the church must deal with this. To be honest, I found this helpful and inspiring, because I was not going through this alone.

What I found very helpful were the voices that invited us to consider this pandemic season as time to relearn how to pray, a time to repent, a time to remain open to God's Spirit, God's voice, and a time to have conversations with others, listen to other peoples' stories, and a time to be Christ to one another. These are ideas for how we can be the church in the middle of a pandemic.

Still other voices encouraged us not to view this Pandemic as a punishment, as something to beat us down. Rather, we were encouraged to believe with Paul, *that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:38-39)

The mist continues to come out of the humidifier. You can see it, but after a few seconds it disappears. It's so fleeting, transitory, and insubstantial. At the end of the day, life is hard and often without good and clear answers.

## **Conclusion**

At different points in history both Jewish and Christian traditions have questions why Ecclesiastes is in the Bible. I, for one, am glad it is in the bible, because it provides a minority viewpoint from the frontlines of human experience, with all its ambiguities and challenges. It challenges us to live fully, faithfully and trust in God to make a way forward for us into the future even when it's not easy for us to see a way forward. Amen