

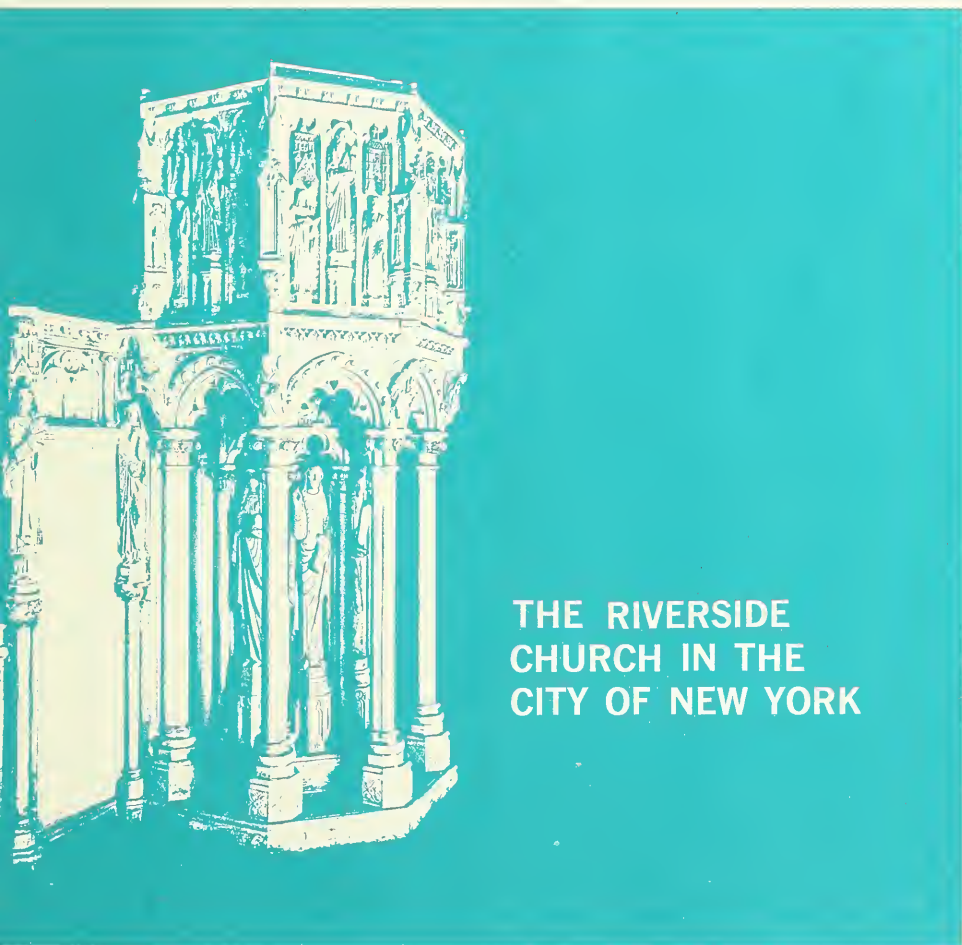
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

DOES LIFE MAKE SENSE?

*"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
Ecclesiastes 1:2*

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*"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
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Martin Heidegger once observed that human beings have a facility for retreating from the mysterious to the manageable. We cannot handle death but we can busy ourselves with funeral arrangements, and we do. We cannot capture God but we can lose ourselves in religion, and we do. We cannot fathom love but we can occupy ourselves with the techniques of sex, and we do. We cannot discern the future but we can pick a television program for tonight, and we do.

Today I should like to counter this retreat from mystery by posing a probing question with far-reaching implications. The question is but four words long, but do not be misled by its brevity. I ask you, as I ask myself, does life make sense?

* * *

I tried the question on some friends recently. The answers I got ran something like this: "Yes and no." "It depends on when you ask me." "When I'm feeling good, yes, when I'm not, no." But to be fair to the question we must get beyond changeable moods and feelings. We all have our bad days: Upon rising we pull the wrong string on the drapes, go on to choose a subway car in which only one door functions, stand in the wrong line at the bank or post office, stain a clean shirt or dress with ketchup, eat the wrong thing for lunch. Sometimes we're up, sometimes we're down.

But our question is more serious than that! It has to do not with immediate feelings or the present state of our fortune, but with the worth of the venture as a whole. Meaning is the central problem of existence. Does life make sense? Does it add up to anything? Is it going anywhere? Does the bottom line

show red or black?

* * *

A chap in the Bible, identified only as the Preacher, was sure that the answer to our question is no. Hear these words from Ecclesiastes 1:2: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." To prove that he wasn't fooling, the writer of those words used the expression "all is vanity" some twenty-five times in his work. His answer was negative. Life does not make sense. Everything is vanity. Nothing counts for anything. The word "vanity" means a breath of exhaled air that disappears. Life is no more than that.

Albert Camus would rise up to second this man's notion by holding that life is fundamentally absurd. When you look the word "absurd" up in the dictionary you discover that it means, "ridiculously senseless, illogical or untrue; contrary to all reason or common sense, laughably foolish or false."

* * *

A word about this seldom visited book would be in order. It is attributed to Solomon, but there is no way in which Solomon could have written it. It carries a later date than that -- probably the third century before Christ.

The historical situation in which this man lived contributed markedly to his cynicism. In 586, just to review it briefly, Jerusalem had fallen and the people been deported to Babylon. Forty-seven years later they were allowed to return to the land. The great hope was for the restoration of the people to the land and the restoration of the land to God.

During the benign rule of the Persians, Jerusalem was rebuilt and the revered temple reconstructed. Sacrifices were offered there. Ritual was painstakingly observed. Foreigners were excluded. Every other rule

and regulation was fulfilled to the letter of the law.
But the day of the Lord did not come!

In the fortuitities of history the Hebrews came to be dominated by yet another power, the power of Greece. It is fair to say that the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Jesus were among the most bitter years the Hebrews ever knew.

It does something to a people to make a grand effort only to find it unavailing. There is cynicism in this book because under some of the puppet rulers that the Greeks installed, there was little correspondence in the land between effort and reward, conduct and recompense.

I suggest to you that these well-known words represent the very essence of cynicism: "I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecc. 9:11) Such words could be written only in a time of graft and political corruption.

We've been there ourselves. In living memory how many wars have we fought for the sake of ending war and enthroning democracy? World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam, not to mention other skirmishes here and there. And to what avail? This helps us to understand our own cynicism as a people.

We are told that Americans give 19 billion dollars a year to charity both at home and abroad. But to what appreciable end? This week twenty Israeli students were slain in a school in Maalot. Just as our tired souls were beginning to take in the awfulness of such mindless terrorism, that story was pushed off the front page when hours later twenty-three civilians were killed and eighty injured by terrorists in Belfast -- presumably in the name of God. We seem to be getting nowhere. Problems obviously multiply more quickly than solutions. "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,

vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

* * *

His cynicism is further supported by his observations -- both theoretical and practical. Theoretically he observes that nature is more durable than man. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever." (Ecc. 1:4) Everything is coming-to-be and passing. Yet, the mountains look down upon this passing scene and appear more durable than man or any of his works. Presently we are gone and soon forgotten like the rest.

It's interesting how a return to nature becomes an appealing option during periods of heavy cynicism. Many in our society today are on a nature trip. In some instances this represents a retreat from history and a determination to find meaning in the cycles of nature. Here is clue to the perennial lure of Baalism in the Old Testament. The Hebrew community, at times, was tempted to repudiate history and identify instead with nature.

Yet, the Preacher goes on to note that even nature itself seems pointless in its cycles. "The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness." (Ecc. 1:5-8) Nature is hardly an out!

He goes on to talk, from practical observation, about the vanity inherent in our achievements. These words with certain substituted nouns and verbs could very well describe our situation: "I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house.

"I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." (Ecc. 2:4-11)

Yet, we go on stretching and competing for prizes, awards, and citations -- most valuable this or that, most likely to succeed, magna cum laude, wealthiest, handsomest, prettiest, best dressed, Miss New York, Miss America, Miss Universe, Man-of-the-Year -- I'll never forget what's his name!!

Even man's moral achievements yield no satisfaction: "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing." (Ecc. 7:15) Even religion cannot be said to pay!

He goes on to speak about possessions. How they play him false. Listen to his sad summation: "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity." (Ecc. 2:18-19) One thinks of those sharply piercing words of Jesus: "This night thy soul will be required of thee, then whose shall these things be?" (Lk. 12:20)

Even in the midst of life we experience waste and death. I spoke earlier this year at a small Baptist

college in Tennessee, got in about seven in the evening, read for awhile and turned in for the night. Next morning someone said, "Did you know that one of the main academic office buildings burned to the ground last night?" The campus resembled a wake. Two young faculty members who had spent from five to seven years working towards a Ph.D. degree saw their notes go up in smoke. And what shall we say of Auschwitz or Hiroshima where more than notes were done away with?

Even in wisdom, the coveted prize here on Morning-side Heights, there is vanity: "I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; and I perceive that this also is a striving after wind; for in much wisdom is much vexation. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." (Ecc. 1:18) Is he saying that we are better off not knowing? Not being smart? That informed? That sensitive? "Seven out of ten people in the world do not read newspapers, listen to the radio, talk on the telephone, or watch television. What do they do? They multiply." 1 Maybe they're right and the seekers after wisdom are not. It may be true that future historians will say of our present generation that they fornicated and read the newspapers. Pity the lucid man in whom existence is concentrated. The more you know, the more it hurts. Does life make sense?

* * *

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Those words open the book but they do not close it. At the end of Ecclesiastes we find these words, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every word into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." (Ecc. 12:13-14)

The exegetes are quick to tell us, and they are right, that those words were not written by the Preacher. They were added on by some pious editor who wanted to make sure that the story had a heavenly ending.

But the truth of the matter is that shot throughout this book are untold references to God. The phrase "under the sun" is a critical term. That term really means "without God." When the writer looked at life "under the sun" that is, without any divine reference, there was nothing but futility and vanity.

But the man believed in God, else he would not have thought it worthwhile to write his thoughts on paper. Life does not make sense apart from God. God, not as an object of knowledge, but as a subject of faith. No one has said it more plainly than Reinhold Niebuhr, "Man's historic existence cannot have meaning without faith." 2

It's time we stopped apologizing for the faith hypothesis by which we live as Christians. Humanism always smuggles some of the fruits of faith into its basket. For humanism itself cannot live apart from faith. It is faith in God that gives life its coherence.

The same man who gave us the words of our text also gave us these words, and I would number them among the most engaging in the Bible! "I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. Also that it is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men should fear before him." (Ecc. 3:10-14) Amen!

This is our coherence. You can juxtapose my little life against the three and one-half billion who live now and the multiplied billions that went before and conclude that my life is little more than a candle in the wind. But what if God gives it meaning? What if under God our actions stick and acquire worth and purpose.

It is a common enough insight that there are two levels of life. There is the temporal and the eternal. But the point that the Bible makes, and it is a startling point when you think about it, is that the eternal and the temporal are interfused. The eternal is not something out there beyond us and indifferent to us while down below we work with mortality tables, crimes statistics and sin. Eternity intersects time. This is how time gains its meaning and its abiding significance. However momentary our lives, they can be intersected by the eternal. We may be small, we may be brief, but we are a God-loved people in a God-loved world!!!

Did you catch the contrast in the Scripture of the morning. The Preacher operating out of cynicism saying, "All is vanity." And Paul coming on centuries later saying, "He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph. 1:9-10) "The mystery of his will," "desire," "plan." Life is not a vanity of vanities. It is the theater of God's actions in our midst.

Paul got that way from his strong understanding of the meaning of the cross in which he learned that God is not only with us but for us. You ask me what the intersecting point is where you live and work. I answer, it is the same point that it has always been, namely love. Somehow in this world when I am in the presence of love the worst in me is judged and the best is made alive.

* * *

Does life make sense? We can escape that question for awhile. We can indulge in the bromides of drink and work and pleasure. But presently, as a friend put it, the "whys" arise. Does life make sense? It's a heavy question and it deserves a serious answer. The man who wrote "Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit

Bag," died a suicide. But so also did the man who wrote, "This Is My Father's World." Even though the faithful see life's meaning clearly, there are times when they may not see it so at all.

There are three things that you can do with your life. You can throw it away. You can while it away. You can give it away. Those who have learned to give themselves away are least likely of all to need it proved that life makes sense.

CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, help us to sense Thy presence
in our world - torn and
embittered though it be.
Let the reality of Thy love
save us from idleness or scorn
Until the shadows lift
and we see as face to face.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Columnist, Boyd, L.M., in the San Francisco Chronicle, August 14, 1971
2. Niebuhr, Reinhold, Faith and History, p. 57, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1949

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