



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Seasonal Wisdom"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On October 20, 2024, from Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 & 3:1-15

Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality
Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see
I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy
Because I'm easy come, easy go
Little high, little low
Any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to me.

As many of you know, these are the lyrics of the famous Queen song "Bohemian Rhapsody," which is the most streamed song of the 20th century. "Rhapsody" ends with a stunningly depressing statement:

Nothing really matters, anyone can see
Nothing really matters
Nothing really matters to me.

While there are over 2000 years between them, Freddie Mercury's words sound very similar to the words we find in the book of Ecclesiastes:

Vanity of vanities! Says the Teacher.
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
Generations come and go.
The sun rises and the sun sets.
All things are wearisome.
There is nothing new under the sun.
All is vanity and chasing after the wind.

Most of us know very little about Ecclesiastes other than the words we just sung from Pete Seeger's song "Turn! Turn! Turn!" that was popularized by *The Byrds* in the 60s and has been regularly used in funeral liturgies ever since. But if all we know about Ecclesiastes is the beginning of chapter 3, it could give us the impression this is a book of comforting poems and wise aphorisms, affirming the experiences we have through the different times and seasons of our lives. However, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is far from affirming of everything.

The book is attributed to a character named Koheleth, which means "Assembly Leader" or "the Teacher," who impersonates King Solomon, even though the book was written 500 years after he died. In fact, Ecclesiastes is the youngest book of the Hebrew Bible and one of the last included in the canon. It was likely written sometime between Alexander the Great conquering the world and the Maccabean Revolt, a time when the Jewish world was radically Hellenized by Greek influences.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Along with Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Job, Ecclesiastes is considered wisdom literature, and throughout its pages, the Teacher is a philosopher who reflects on the great questions that occupy generations: the meaning of life, the unfairness of fate, the inevitability of death—and death’s cruelty in stripping us all of dignity, distinctiveness, and achievement. The Teacher’s mind is restless, ruthless, subtle, and unwilling to accept easy answers, even their own. They return over and over to the major themes of work, pleasure, money, power, wisdom, death, and God, yet there are no dogmatic statements, doctrines, beliefs, or commandments.

Instead, the Teacher presents themselves as someone who has seen it all, had it all, and done it all, and has come to render a comprehensive judgement, “All is vanity and a chasing after the wind.” Through the course of 12 chapters, the Teacher claims, work is vanity, pleasure is vanity, time is vanity, youth is vanity, money is vanity, fame is vanity, power is vanity, expectation is vanity, retribution is vanity, trying to understand God is vanity, wisdom is vanity, and life itself is vanity. This reminds me of the lyrics to a 90s song, “it’s a bittersweet symphony, this life. Try to make ends meet, you’re a slave to money then you die.” Koolhaas would approve. Again and again, the Teacher resoundingly proclaims three disturbing truths that most would rather pretend are not the case: 1) Time marches on, we are a blip in the universe. 2) Death comes for us all; we are all going to die. 3) Life is random; we are not in control.

With these disturbing truths, it’s a wonder anyone in history has ever liked the book of Ecclesiastes, but it is beloved by those who are grieving the loss of someone or something, experiencing a sense of meaninglessness, or doubting the existence of God. A chaplain who served in Vietnam once attested it was the only book in the Bible his soldiers were willing to hear. A student suffering from recurring bouts of depression once said reading Ecclesiastes is like slipping into a warm bath. That may be because Teacher is impatient with all pious talk and cheap versions of morality. Their words cut through all the drivel, hogwash and baloney we are often fed, and firmly rejects every form of sentimental religiosity. It is reassuring to know that even the experience of total alienation from life and God appears in the biblical tradition and that grief, loss, alienation, and depression are recognized and affirmed as a crucial part of the journey of faith. And many who are struggling have found that reading this book has led them to a more genuine and authentic faith in God.

Alongside those who are suffering, Ecclesiastes has also traditionally been a book that is beloved by youth and young people because it shuns everything adults seem to find important and urges us to “eat, drink, and be merry,” and seek out enjoyment and happiness in life. This instruction by Ecclesiastes was famously picked up by the Dave Matthews Band in their song “Tripping Billies.” Conjuring the wild cheers of throngs of the youthful and inebriated everywhere Dave would sing, “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we’ll die,” extolling his audiences to remember that life is short and that we should enjoy it while we can.

Yet, there has also a dark side to the youthful exuberance of “all is vanity, so eat drink and be merry.” Ecclesiastes has also been associated with the dangerous philosophy of Nihilism, which is a form of extreme cynicism that contends all life is meaningless, nothing in the world has real existence, and all moral and religious principles should be rejected.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Nothing matters, so anything is permitted. Nihilism was born in Russian literature as a reaction to the Enlightenment, and found its key voice in German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously warned of nihilism when he wrote that “God is dead” in 1884. He believed the Enlightenment had killed the idea of God as the source of all morality, value, and order, which he thought, would cause Europeans to spiral into a catatonic Nihilism. The Enlightenment’s critical examination of traditional morality and social structures (through the core belief in reason) would lead to a mass sense of meaninglessness and that Enlightenment went hand in hand with the aggressive global expansion of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. And Nietzsche believed this would lead to a distrust of all forms of meaning was going to sweep over Europe, eventually creating to a world where nothing but power mattered, and the West would destroy itself.

More and more young people today are turning to Nihilism to cope with the depressing reality of life in the 21st century. The subreddit r/nihilism grew from 31,000 members in 2019 to 115,000 in 2022. Nihilistic philosophies have become more frequent on social media sites where young people find them. The German animation studio *Kurzgesagt*, has a well-produced 7-minute video called “Optimistic Nihilism” that now has over 17 million views. They’ve even created an archetype for nihilistic youth called the Doomer. The Doomer is a black and white drawing of a disheveled sleep deprived person wearing a black stocking cap and a hooded sweatshirt, with dark circles under his eyes, smoking a cigarette. It appeared in 2018 as a figure of self-loathing and discontent but has come to embody the nihilism our youth associate with clinical depression, hopelessness, doom, dread, despair, due to a belief the end of the world is coming from climate catastrophe and extractive capitalism.

A study published in 2021 by the University of Bath and Stanford found that over 56% of young people believe that humanity is doomed, many of them citing the climate crisis, civil rights abuses, or the inability of governments to govern. The digital echo chambers and overabundance of information is causing the largest generation ‘Gen Z,’ to become increasingly nihilistic; believing life is devoid of meaning, all knowledge is subjective, and humanity is doomed. And these nihilistic tendencies make younger generations more susceptible to extremism.

We can’t blame social media alone for the rise in nihilism. Today there are 30 million Americans between the age 18-24 and another 73 million coming up behind them. Consider what they’ve experienced over the last 24 years. The banks failed to protect homes and jobs, the FDA to protect them from opioids, their government failed to protect them from the Covid pandemic. They’ve never seen a year of peace from wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and now Israel. The Supreme Court has taken away Affirmative Action and reproductive rights as radical extremism rises, the bedrocks of American life erode beneath us and democracy is on the brink of ruin. One could argue it’s been nothing but the failure of every institution in their lives.

They’ve doing active shooter drills for their entire lives and are experiencing climate catastrophe while our government and its citizens continue to punt the ball down the road on meaningful gun control and environmental policy.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

The government, the banks, the economy, the churches, the schools have all failed them. Why wouldn't young people become Doomers? Why wouldn't they all be nihilists? Vanity, vanity, all is vanity! Everything seems meaningless and futile! Young people turning to nihilism deeply concerns me because it is the same thing that happened in Germany after WWI. In the wake of national humiliation, German youth turned to nihilism, making it easy for leaders like Hitler to seduce them into the Nazi party. Nihilism has always been a breeding ground for fascism and other forms of violent extremism.

You might be thinking, "But Ben, the people who stormed the capitol on January 6th weren't nihilists, they were Christian Nationalist." Yes, but as the documentary *Bad Faith*, and our speakers told us at our conference last Saturday, this current movement is not and has never been about Jesus, Christianity, or morality, but simply about power. The reality is that what we call "Christian Nationalism" today would be better described as "Christian Nihilism." They have no true morality; all they want is power for themselves and for people who believe the way they do. As Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress said about Trump: "I don't want some meek and mild leader or somebody who's going to turn the other cheek. I've said I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find to protect this nation."¹ Christian Nihilists believe they are in a holy war, against demonic enemies, and have proclaimed repeatedly that will use any means necessary and stop at nothing to take power. Believe them!

Neither Jesus nor the book of Ecclesiastes is compatible with the philosophy of Nihilism, even if its masquerading as Christian. Many modern interpreters translate the word "Vanity" as "meaningless," but that is not what was intended. The Hebrew word "*hevel*" means vapor, mist, fog, gas, or smoke—a element that is beautiful but fleeting. It moves and is blown too and forth by the wind. It can take different shapes. When you are in the thick of it, it is impossible to see clearly. And while it looks like a solid, if you try to grab it, it slips right through your fingers like smoke, life is confusing, absurd, disorienting, and uncontrollable. The word "*hevel*" was never intended to convey meaningless but ephemerality, transience, impermanence—the temporary, fleeting, fading, fugacious, vanishing, and evanescent reality of our lives that are here today and gone tomorrow. And, the author of Ecclesiastes consistently claims, that even though life is often absurd and most definitely ephemeral and fleeting, life still has tremendous meaning.

The Teacher was far less a Nihilist and far more like the Existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Tillich, Sartre, and Camus who rose up to counter the nihilistic fantasies of their age. Where Nihilism recognizes the meaningless of life and argues for no prescription except living like animals, Existentialism recognizes the absurdity and ephemerality of human existence yet argues for striving to find meaning and purpose amid the fog. What existential wisdom does the Teacher offer us? Be humble. You can't control your life, so you should stop trying. Learn to hold everything with an open hand, because you only have control over one thing and that is the way you show up in the present moment. Try your best to reduce your anxiety about death, stop worrying about the end of the world, and choose to enjoy life, a conversation with a friend, the sun on your face, or a good meal. Eat, drink and be merry. Enjoy the good things because they are gifts from God.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

This may seem like a form of escapism from the extremely serious political moment we find ourselves in as Americans with only 16 days to the election. But the Teacher's words signal a wakeup call to remind us that the brevity of human life only heightens its moral implications. The very fact life is passing quickly away exposes the absurdity of certain human behaviors that inhibit our fellow human being's ability to flourish and find enjoyment. While there is much we cannot control in life, there is also a crucial element of choice involved in living well. We have the power to decide whether our posture will be one of acceptance or resistance, whether we will fight the ever-changing rhythms of life or whether we will dance with them. If everything is fleeting, then creating the greatest level of enjoyment for ourselves and other people is not a matter of good luck but a work of great delicacy and skill. This means never giving in to the nihilistic temptation to believe that life is meaningless, but working to create meaning for ourselves and for other people, by finding ways that we can all have a share in the abundant gifts God has given to us all.

The Oscar winning film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, is a massive movie, encompassing multiple universes and alternate versions of its characters, that confronts the danger of nihilism head on. Despite its complexity the plot is very simple; it's a story of a family searching for meaning while struggling to survive financially. Evelyn, Waymond, and their daughter Joy own a laundromat that is being audited by the IRS, when their lives are interrupted by an alternate version of Waymond from another universe who begs Evelyn to help him fight a character known as Jobu Tupaki that is trying to destroy the multiverse but turns out to be an alternate version of their daughter. Talk about a parent/child drama! Joy developed the ability to jump between universes, experienced every possible version of herself, and has come to believe the infinite chaos means "nothing matters" and there is no reason to exist.

In nihilism Joy creates a black hole "everything bagel" that will collapse in on itself killing her and the entire multiverse if no one stops her. At first, Evelyn is briefly persuaded but then refutes it because she believes in the positive value of human relationships. The epic battle of mother and daughter unfolds for most of the film, but eventually Joy tells her mother, "I wasn't looking for you so I could kill you. I was just looking for someone who could see what I see, feel what I feel." She needed someone willing to take on the same curse she bears. So, Evelyn abandons everything for her daughter, and Joy is saved by her mother's unrelenting sacrificial love. At end of the movie she says, "Maybe there is something out there that explains why you still went looking for me through all this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you." Joy replies, "Why not go somewhere where your daughter is more than this? Here, all we get are a few specks of time where any of this actually makes any sense." But Evelyn says, "Then I will cherish these few specks of time [I have with you]. You are not unlovable. There is always someone to love even in a stupid, stupid universe." Then Joy hugs her mom, and the multiverse is saved.

Yes, time marches on, we are a blip in the universe. Yes, death comes for us all; we are all going to die. Yes, life is random; we are not in control. But that doesn't make life less meaningful, but more meaningful. It means every single second that we are breathing is precious. It means every good thing we have the chance to enjoy should be treasured. It means every human life that exists on this earth is beloved.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

And it means every single relationship we have with another person is not only chock full of meaning, but the very thing that has the greatest power to save our lives and the world from the absurdity, chaos, and ephemerality of human existence. Any time we find ourselves falling into the nihilistic feeling that life is meaningless, all we need to do is to look at the beautiful face of another person that we love or at someone who loves us. We are what makes life meaningful. We are each other's reason for existing. And this is why we are going to fight like hell and vote like hell over the next two weeks in order to make sure that nihilism does not have the last word and fascism does not take over this country, because we believe that every single human being in this nation has a right to "eat, drink, and be merry" with bread on their tables, water in their cup, clothing on their backs, a roof over their heads, and time for rest.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, and a chasing after the wind," but loving our neighbor as ourselves is not vanity and the wind we are chasing after is the Spirit of love that brings us all together into a beloved community. Pleasure is vanity, time is vanity, youth is vanity, money is vanity, possessions is vanity, fame is vanity, power is vanity, expectations is vanity, retribution is vanity, trying to understand God is vanity, wisdom is vanity, life is vanity, but loving humanity is not vanity. Giving is what makes us human, giving is what makes us divine, giving is what brings us together, giving is what makes the absurdity, chaos, and ephemerality of our world a place worth living. Neither God, life, or our neighbors can be mastered or shaped in conformity with our own desires. They can only be enjoyed. As Mark Twain wrote, "Love's arithmetic is simple: when griefs are shared, they are subtracted and divided and when joys are shared, they are added and multiplied." So, no matter the way the wind blows, the wisdom for this season is to refuse to be overcome by nihilistic doom, and to learn how to live for the sake of each other. It's not truth that nothing matters. It is true that nothing but love matters. Love God and love your neighbor, that is the meaning of life, and it is never too late for us to find it.

ⁱ <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/donald-trump-defender-dallas-pastor-robert-jeffress/>