

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

BREATHING BEYOND VANITY

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)

Analysis by Michael Hoy

2Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

12I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, 13applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. 14I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

2:18I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me 19- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 23For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

DIAGNOSIS: Breathless

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Toiling in Vain

The Teacher, from beginning to end in Ecclesiastes, bemoans all of one's labors as a "vanity and a chasing after the wind." The word "vanity" (v. 2 and throughout) means literally "breath" or "vapor," and gives the sense of the worthlessness and fruitlessness of all of human endeavors as that which evaporates into the air. This Teacher sees nothing but hatred, pain, vexation, and restlessness for all of this. So do we all who live by the sweat of our brows and without a sense of purpose or meaningful life.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Despair

It is little wonder that in the midst of this meaningless existence that one would despair (v. 20). All of one's efforts are for naught, and cannot help one bit to make life better for the toiler. It is a living death.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God's has given it

Worse yet is the fact that this Teacher names God as the One who has "given [this toil] to human beings to be busy with" (v. 13). He calls it "an unhappy business." Unhappiness, at this deeply theological level, may even be an understatement for all that this toil and struggle suggests for us all who live our days under the sun.

PROGNOSIS: Breathing Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God Has Given Him!

There is only one place in this entire text that we might glisten some good news, though the Teacher may not have witnessed or welcomed it as clearly as he might. The Teacher writes about himself as "someone who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it" (v. 21). In the Teacher's mind wrapped and

buried in despair, this is seen as yet another “vanity and great evil.” But there is One whom God has given who did toil, with all his wisdom and knowledge and skill, who did give to others to enjoy the fruits of his toil. As his own last vapor of breath is given up on the cross, Christ gives life and enjoyment and the fruit of his being so that we may live in his great abundance of mercy and grace. Here is our new Teacher who sees his toil worth it all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Hope

This toil spells a new message for us—a message of hope and promise! No longer caught in the web of despair, we are set free to enjoy how we are treasured as the inheritors of his labors! It is not us chasing after the wind, but the Wind chasing after us with a Word of new life!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Enjoying the Labor

And this enjoyment extends now also to the fruits of what we do, not as people under the burden of the sun, but upheld by the burden of the Son who gives us days of fruitful being. Especially is this so as we become sharers of this word with those who can only breathe the poisonous air of despair. What task will you give us, O Lord, this day that we might embrace as an occasion of sharing your promising Breath for all!