

## ***What the preacher said***

Eccl. 2:1-17; 3:9-15; 12:13-14  
Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman  
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1. Intro: SPU shooting [[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-levison/after-the-shooting-at-spu\\_b\\_5460475.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-levison/after-the-shooting-at-spu_b_5460475.html)]. Gathering: silence, hymns, scripture (Eccl. 3:iff). Then: “**In consolation, remember desolation. In desolation, remember consolation.**” A great paradox; and this too sounds as though it is from Eccl., although it’s not.
2. Eccl is full of paradox, contradictions, ambiguities that have long left readers puzzled. *The writer seeks wisdom, knowing it is better to be wise than foolish, yet the wise and the fool end up the same: they both pass away and are forgotten. That is vanity.* But this is the way life is: full of contradictions, disappointments, paradoxes, unresolved mysteries, doubt. Life is messy like that, and doesn’t always have the endings we’d like. The very things about Eccl that make us scratch our head in puzzlement may be its very point: there’s much about life that leaves us that way. (Note: cong. pulling out of IN-MI conference.) One reason I like Eccl: because it doesn’t flinch when faced with the realities of life. It shows us life as it really is, not the way we wished it were.
  - a. In both Jewish tradition and Christian tradition some have questioned including Eccl. In the Bible. I, for one, am happy it made it into the canon. Eccl. keeps together the material and the spiritual worlds, the secular and the sacred, the mundane and the sublime.
3. Background (words defined)
  - a. Eccl in Hebrew: *Qoheleth*, meaning assembly or congregation, most often translated “teacher.”
  - b. Key word to the meaning of the whole: *hevel* (38 times): *vanity* in NRSV, *meaningless* in NIV, *utter futility* in JPS, *smoke* in *The Message*; best: *vapor or mist or breath*, something which doesn’t last long—it comes and soon goes.
4. “What the teacher said” (focus on three things we can learn from him):
  - a. Life is short, fleeting, like vapor or mist: the generations come and the generations go. To be human is to be aware of our mortality. (Tell surgery story and need to talk about death; went to hermitage for death retreat.) *Remember everyday, you will die* (St. Benedict).
  - b. Because life is like the mist of the morning that dissipates quickly, the preacher says to pay close attention to and take delight in the things of daily life. Take pleasure in the simple things of life: food, drink, friendship—we could add play, art, music. Use FB examples-- Vinita W: time walking her dog, having an evening to read or spend time with her spouse. My simple pleasures mantra: the smell of fresh

ground coffee, a tailwind while biking, being with my grandchildren. Treasure these experiences. Seek them out. Be alive, be aware, use the senses that God has given us—all of them: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. (“To give” appears 28 times in this short book, 15 times it is in reference to God being the Giver.) **“What if every sound, every color, every thing that is around you right now, is a gift from God designed specifically for you right now?”** (Rabbi Michael Barclay, *Sacred Relationships*). What if?! And what if we were to find pleasure, enjoyment and meaning in our work—to take delight in it? This too is what God intends for us. There have been times in my life when I didn’t take delight in my work, and I pined for something different to do. Usually that was my problem; I didn’t have the imagination to see how my work could be made more meaningful, how it fit into a life ordered by the love and fear of God.

- c. Bifocal vision: don’t lose sight of the things close at hand, the things which are like mist and don’t endure; but also keep your focus on the enduring and the eternal. In the final analysis: *Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.* Fear means awe, rather than to be afraid of God. And we live out that awe by obeying what God commands us to do: Jesus put that as simply as Eccl: Love God and love others as ourselves, including praying for and loving our enemies. (Sometimes we make faith too complex. Both the Preacher and Jesus boil it down to simple statements, even though they are challenging to live out.)

5. Conclusion:

- a. LMC class: one student thought it dark and depressing at first, by the end found it hopeful; a psychologist said she knew of a therapist who used it in counseling.
- b. Read it once a year: keeps us grounded in life as it is, not in some otherworldly reality. Good time: on New Year’s day.
- c. Pre-Christian, not anti-Christian book. Think of it as another John the Baptist who prepares us for and leads us to Christ.
- d. Christ came into this very messy, paradoxical world; as John 1 says, he came and pitched his tent and lived among us. He took this world upon, absorbed all of its messiness and seeming meaninglessness in his own being. Here is the ultimate paradox: the Son of God gave up his heavenly privileges to live among us as one of us in the kind of messy world the Preacher knew all so well. And Jesus died, ultimately, that we might have life, life now and in the age to come. That too is a paradox worth pondering and embracing. Amen.