

The World is Not Enough Part II: Life, the Universe, and Everything – Ecc.1:12-18

I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. It is a bad business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless, like chasing the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is missing cannot be recovered. I said to myself, ‘Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them.’ So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness to folly. But learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase in knowledge increase in sorrow (Ecc. 12:1-8, NLT & NRSV).

Last week we introduced our series on the Book of Ecclesiastes with the Teacher’s opening contention that a life lived ‘under the sun,’ that is, apart from God, is in the final analysis, meaningless. Any attempt to find meaning in life apart from God, the Teacher insists, is like trying to take hold of smoke; the moment you catch it, it slips through your fingers and vanishes. We now enter the portion of his teaching in which he shares how he came to this conclusion through hard personal experience as he shares some of the ways he sought meaning apart from God and came up short. In today’s passage, he shares his *search for meaning through the accumulation and analysis of knowledge*. He begins, ‘I, the Teacher, was king of Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven.’ Two things here. First, following up on last week’s discussion of the Teacher’s identity, whether he actually is Solomon or someone else taking on Solomon’s persona, it is clear from this comment (and others to come) that the life we are meant to bear in mind is Solomon’s. Solomon was known for his wisdom. In fact, in response to his own request, God had granted him a wise and discerning mind (1 Kings 3). He was indeed the sort of man who searched for understanding and explored by wisdom everything being done under heaven. So, whether the Teacher is Solomon or not, as we move through this book,

the life of Solomon provides the context for what follows. Second thing to note, however, is that the wisdom and understanding spoken of here goes beyond Solomon's divine gift of wisdom. Here, we are talking about an attempt to understand the world through the accumulation and analysis of knowledge through the use of the finite human mind. We're not talking about divine wisdom or revelation, we're talking about wisdom as it is exercised 'under the sun,' that is, using the human intellect alone to try to make sense of and find meaning in life. This is, it should be acknowledged, a noble pursuit. The acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of the higher mind, the analysis of the world around us, this is the stuff of science, philosophy, theology, and a whole host of disciplines that have enriched and do enrich our lives in many ways. But the question before us is whether such a pursuit, itself, that is, 'under the sun,' can provide ultimate meaning to one's life.

So, how did this pursuit turn out for the Teacher? Well, not too well. The Teacher describes this pursuit to be '*a bad business*.' In other words, it failed to produce the satisfaction he sought. It was great to have knowledge, to read books and know things, but it didn't satisfy the deepest desires of his heart. Because, for starters, as anyone who has ever studied anything knows, the more we learn, the more questions we have. And sometime the answers just don't come. The Moody Blues got it right long ago when they sang, 'why do we never get an answer, when we're knocking at the door?' The singer of that song expresses what we all really want as he sings, 'I'm looking for someone to change my life. I'm looking for a miracle in my life.' But all the half a million questions that he asks, even when answers are found, just don't provide that. Furthermore, all the knowledge in the world can't fix everything. Sure, the acquisition and application of knowledge makes some things better, but, as we discussed last week, even with the advances of knowledge and technology, the same issues, the same problems, the same struggles, persist. So much that is crooked cannot be made straight. My goodness, in the last 30 years, the world's knowledge has increased exponentially. With the advent of the

internet, practically all the world's knowledge is at our fingertips. Has this made things better? In some ways, sure. But in the deepest, most meaningful ways, no. And in fact, all this knowledge has created new problems for us. As the Teacher says, with the increase of knowledge comes the increase of sorrow. I think most of us know this at the most personal of levels. As we grow, as we mature, we all increase in knowledge. But sometimes, we find ourselves singing with Bob Seeger, 'wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then.' The pursuit of knowledge is good in many ways. But in terms of fulfilling the deepest desires of the human heart, it falls short. It doesn't satisfy. And so, the teacher concludes, trying to find the meaning of life through the acquisition and analysis of knowledge is like chasing the wind. It's Hevel. Smoke that slips through your fingers and then vanishes before your eyes. Just when you think you have it all figured out, you discover that you really don't. As Whitesnake sang, 'though I keep searching for an answer, I never seem to find what I'm looking for.' All of the knowledge in the world is not enough.

Douglas Adams expresses this so well in his classic, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In that sci-fi existentialist classic, Douglas writes of 'Deep Thought' a supercomputer tasked with ascertaining the answer to 'life, the universe, and everything.' For seven and a half million years it works assiduously on the problem, acquiring and analyzing the collective knowledge of the entire galaxy. Finally, the day comes for Deep Thought to reveal the answer. The whole galaxy waits with bated breath. Millions have gathered to hear the revelation in person. Trillions more watch on screens from their home worlds and spacecraft. Finally, Deep Thought speaks. The answer to life, the universe, and everything is...42. [Pause]. Someone shouts, 'is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?' To which Deep Thought responds, 'I checked it thoroughly, and that quite definitely is the answer.' And then Deep Thought adds this: *'I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is.'*

Whew. That's deep. Cosmic. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you – you who are seeking to understand the meaning of life with your mind – is that

you've never actually known what the question is. Or perhaps, you've never really known what it is to know. Maybe, to really know, to really find the deepest answers, we have to use something other than our heady intellectualism. Several weeks ago, in the course of preparing this series, I occasioned upon the account of the two disciples who encountered the Risen Jesus as they walked dejectedly to *Emmaus* in the aftermath of the cross (Luke 24). The story begins with the disciples 'deep in thought' (see...?), discussing and trying to make sense out of everything that had happened. Suddenly, Jesus comes along, but they don't recognize him. They walk with him for a long time, miles, and as they do, he fills their heads with knowledge. Luke tells us that he opened the scriptures to them, explaining everything in them about the Messiah. What a Bible study! Can you imagine! Probably the most important Bible study of all time – Jesus himself going through the whole of the Old Testament pointing out what it all means in connection with himself. How great would that be to have that? Such Bible knowledge? Why oh, why didn't Luke record it? But it's a funny thing. Even with all that Bible knowledge being poured into their heads, they still didn't recognize Jesus. But as they reached their destination, they asked Jesus, still not knowing he was Jesus, to stay with them. *They invited him in.* And as they sat down to break bread, suddenly, *in that intimate moment*, they knew him. And as I pondered that, not so much with my mind but my heart, I knew: Luke didn't record that Bible study because he knew that his readers wouldn't find Jesus through the accumulation of information. That wasn't the sort of knowledge they needed. They needed to knowledge of a different sort. This week, 'coincidentally,' in Lectio 365 Joshua Luke Smith offered: *'there is a wisdom born not of intellect but of intimacy...too often I create tangled webs within my mind, fooled into thinking that if could just read more, understand more, I could set myself free. But the wisdom of God is not information to be consumed, nor an idea to be conquered – it can only be received in communion with the Spirit. It is in that place of intimacy and surrender that we discover what God has prepared for those who love him.'* Lectio.

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Oh my. This is how we know. This is how we find meaning. Not through the feverish acquisition and analysis of knowledge, but by simply opening ourselves to the reality, presence and intimacy of God around us, who is ever with us just as he was with those disciples. I relate to the Teacher. I'm a heady sort of guy. I read books and I know things. And I love being that. I especially love being that in my capacity as a pastor. I love being a theologian. I love pondering the deep mysteries of God. I love dissecting passages and assembling sermons, not just for your sake, but because as I do, I learn, I grow more in my understanding, I acquire more knowledge and use it to help me make sense of life. This is my calling. But like the Teacher, I have come to understand that this is not enough. That all the knowledge in the world, even Bible knowledge, all my theological musings, will never satisfy the deepest longings of the soul or make sense of life. Truly, the more I know the more questions I have. As the Indigo Girls sang, 'I went to the doctor. I went to the mountain. I looked to the children. I drank from the fountain,' only to discover that 'there's more than one answer to my questions, pointing me in a crooked line.' There are crooked things I will never make straight, and lost things I'll never find. There are some things I will never understand. At least not with the workings of *my* mind. What I need is more God. What I need is less thinking and more of his *presence*. What I need, just as the disciples on the way to Emmaus needed, isn't more information to analyze, but more intimacy, more communion, with the One who alone is the answer that I seek. He is the answer.

And so, I've come to see that the Teacher is right. The pursuit of knowledge, while noble, isn't enough. And in my prayer times, this is what I've discovered, if you'll allow me to share another of my poems:

Using many words,

I stretch and grope and strain

to understand the ineffable,

to explain what I can't explain.

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I've done so for so many years,

trying to understand.

Asking, answering, questions,

gripping reason with my hand.

An expert I'm supposed to be,

the guy who knows it all.

But now at last I've come to see:

The time has come to fall,

Into the grace of silence,

where questions cease to be,

where reasons do not matter,

Only you and me.

With you I find my answers

though neither of us speak.

My arguments, superfluous,

it's presence that I seek.

This – in the silencing of the mind and resting in the presence of God – is, I believe, how we find the answer that Deep Thought could not provide. It is to understand the question of our hearts rightly, and to seek the right kind of knowing. This is how we find life's meaning, not through the striving of the mind, but by surrendering to the God who is all the answer we will ever need to life, the universe, and everything.

Let us pray.