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Emmanuel, Staunton

*\*This text is a jumping off point for the preached sermon. The text may differ from the sermon as delivered in the pulpit.\**

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“All is vanity and a chasing after wind.”

This is the truth. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes is telling us the truth. And it is very hard to hear.

“it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”

It is easy to dismiss the little book of Ecclesiastes. It only comes up once in the three-year Sunday lectionary and it often brings us up short but if we sit with the text and let the wisdom sink deep into our bones we can learn three things:

First, this is the truth; Second, it is Good News; and, third, it changes how we live.

To the first point:

It doesn't take long to realize that “all is vanity”. The Hebrew word used in this passage as ‘vanity’ means vanity in the purest sense: absurd, fleeting, a vapor.

All is vanity. All is absurd. All is fleeting. All is a vapor.

Perhaps I should only speak for myself, but it doesn't take much work to look at the state of the world and come to this conclusion.

Thoreau wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

We see it in the lives of those around us and in our own lives. We are on a treadmill going nowhere and the speed is constantly increasing. We are pressured to do more, be more, spend more, work more and for what?

Our pursuits are scaffolding holding up an illusion. Scripture reminds us that we are but dust.

We are not in control. We are creatures of God's creating. Farmer and poet Wendell Berry said that "we live the given life."

And yet from those first moments in the garden we have reached for control, to be like God. We order our lives and plan our futures as though we have that power. We rebel against the truth that we were created from dust and will return to dust at a time we don't get to choose.

None of this is new to our postmodern age, of course. Humans have rebelled against the givenness of our lives from the beginning.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote that we humans have a "deeply rooted aversion to our own creatureliness."

So we search and plan and scheme and hop up on the treadmill with no destination in sight. We jump to anything that offers the promise of salvation but only delivers temporary satiation.

A new relationship, a new job, a new city, a new car, a new diet, a new....

There is always something on the horizon that will make us whole, to complete us.

What we rebel against when we push against this idea that we are creatures and life is given to us is the fact of limits and death.

We cannot do everything we want. We cannot live forever.

Our economy and our society try to convince us that we can be anything, do anything, but again, we know it isn't true - all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

We can do many things, but not everything.

We can live a very long time, but not forever.

We are limited creatures with an unlimited imagination and we often imagine ourselves into destruction.

The Psalmist describes this predicament with poetic beauty:

"We can never ransom ourselves, \*  
or deliver to God the price of our life;

For the ransom of our life is so great, \*  
that we should never have enough to pay it,

For we see that the wise die also;  
like the dull and stupid they perish \*  
and leave their wealth to those who come after them.

Their graves shall be their homes for ever,  
their dwelling places from generation to generation, \*  
though they call the lands after their own names.”

We rage against the dying light and name lands after ourselves and for what? “All is  
vanity and a chasing after the wind.”

We are restless as we wander the earth looking for home or wholeness. St. Augustine  
famously wrote that “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O God.”

But a more modern way, as U2 sings, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

We search and search for solid ground but find only shifting sands. Fulfillment,  
wholeness is just out of reach.

So where is the Good News?

It comes in Paul’s letter to the Colossian church.

“If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is,  
seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things  
that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When  
Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

Did you catch that?

You have already died.

Paul is firmly in the past tense: “If you have been raised with Christ...”. “...for you have  
died, and your life (NOW) is hidden with Christ in God.”

You have died and been raised, already. Baptism is not merely a ritual washing but a  
drowning, a death.

We have been raised to a new life in which we are free to be creatures of God's creating, insignificant members made significant in the Body of Christ.

"Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

Don't lie to yourself anymore, Paul says. "All is vanity and a chasing after wind." The only thing that matters is the love of God that burst forth in creation and that fills the whole world. All that matters is that love that holds the stars in the sky and that holds the atoms of your body together.

"In that renewal", Paul says, when you live in the knowledge of your creatureliness, the givenness of life, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

It is all Christ.

How then are we to live?

The first step is to remember our limits.

The ancient Christian church used the phrase *memento mori* as a mantra of this fact: remember your death. Many of the early Church Fathers kept a skull on their desk to remind them that they are living (or reading or writing) in the shadow of death.

The second step is to accept that life is given and that we are not in control.

Wendell Berry tells a story of sitting on the front porch with his father when his father was near the end of his long life. Out of the blue in the cool, dark night, his dad said,

"Well, I've had a wonderful life. And I've had nothing to do with it."

This is givenness.

Through the accidents of time and the will of God, we find ourselves here in this church on this morning. We find ourselves in this town, in this state, in this country right now, at this moment.

If we zoom out of our blinder-ed view of our to-do list we can see that we find ourselves on this summer morning perched on a green planet spinning in the middle of an infinite, black space.

In that reality, I will hold up a small piece of bread which is the Body of Christ “given for you”.

Wendell Berry said, “We must learn to live the given life in a given world.”

All is vanity and a chasing after the wind.

All is grace. All is given.

Amen.