

Sermon Draft for October 20, 2024

Text: Ecclesiastes 5:10–20

Sermon: “True Joy, Peace, and Rest”

The Propers for this Sunday portray the joy of life that is found not in the perishable riches of this world but only in a relationship with the eternal God. The psalmist writes, **“In the way of your testimonies I delight as in all riches”** (Psalm 119:14). The writer of Hebrews reminds us that there is a **“Sabbath rest for the people of God”** who enter **“God’s rest”** (Hebrews 4:9–10). Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark 10:23–31, teaches us that real riches endure beyond this world and are the gift of God for eternity. So also, we pray in the Collect that God would **“put away from us all things hurtful and give us those things that are beneficial for us.”**

Jack was a man who lived a life of great material success. He had served valiantly in World War II and, like so many of that great generation, returned home to his wife and children and became a businessman.

Jack came to believe that life was a game called “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” For him, the evidence of his value was that he drove the best and biggest car in town. If someone else had a bigger car, he would head to the dealership and get a newer, better one. It all ended quite sadly, however. One day, he left the ignition on while opening the trunk and, in a freak accident, the car slipped from park to reverse and ended his life. The very possession that characterized his life, the biggest car available, ultimately took his life. If the meaning of life is found in any of our possessions, then we are in trouble.

We human beings all want to find meaning for our lives. The things of this world can be quite alluring and tempting as tangible proof that our lives have meaning. It’s something of a shock when the writer of Ecclesiastes condemns all our efforts with the rather strong “vanity.” In other words, all is utterly meaningless if God is excluded. But when he is present, in place of hopelessness and death, God enables us to know the meaning of life.

Is meaning in earthly treasures that are seen? Is meaning known by our search for peace? There are exceptions to this (and we all can think of a few people), but most of us do not want a life of conflict. We would rather have a life that is peaceful and serene. We want to be at peace with ourselves and others. Our culture holds up material success as the key to peace, if you have enough of the things of this world, you will insulate yourself from external and internal conflict. But a materialistic culture proves itself wrong. Money does not buy peace with others in fact, it can increase conflict. Ecclesiastes tells us, “***When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?***” (v 11).

An elderly woman once won the lottery and went from a modest income to being a millionaire. She commented on how many long-lost relatives she had rediscovered since winning the money. So many, in fact, that she moved and shut off her phone service just to have some peace from others. Nor can money buy internal peace.

Ecclesiastes warns us, “***The full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep***” (v 12b).

When earthly possessions are the most important part of a person’s life, they can quickly take over one’s mind and bring restlessness and worry and sleepless nights. All the riches of this world cannot buy peace. “Meaningless,” says Ecclesiastes.

Is meaning known by our search for eternity? We have all seen buildings and monuments that bear the name of the wealthy person who gave the money to erect the building. The thing about these structures is that they do not last forever. They will crumble and fall and, on the Last Day, be destroyed with all the earth. So much for money buying anything eternal! “Meaningless,” says Ecclesiastes.

What about leaving a legacy of wealth for a person’s descendants? Ecclesiastes reminds us that he has seen where “***riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand***” (v 14).

Look at Europe. On the continent, there are descendants of once wealthy nobility who today possess grand titles but whose family fortunes have been lost for generations. All this is “meaningless,” says Ecclesiastes.

Nor, as the expression has it, can “you take it with you when you go.” Ever seen a trailer hitch on a hearse? Ecclesiastes puts it, ***As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand*** (v 15). All the riches of this world cannot buy eternity. “Meaningless,” says Ecclesiastes.

So, what is at the root of all this “meaninglessness” of earthly possessions? Remember the words of our text, ***He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity*** (v 10). There is that key word, “love” that is, not “love” as a mere affection or emotion, but as devotion that reflects God’s love for us in the love we are to bear to him.

One of the most misquoted verses of Scripture is 1 Timothy 6:10, which is wrongly cited as “**money is the root of all evil.**” In fact, Paul wrote that “**the love of money**” is the root.

And so, it is. Whatever one trusts in and loves so much that it is the most important thing in his or her life has become that person’s god. Remember the catechism on the First Commandment, “**You shall have no other gods.**” What does this mean? “**We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.**” This is the heart of the problem in a search for the meaning of life. How we answer the question “Who or what is our god?” makes all the difference in whether life even has meaning.

Is meaning in treasures that are not seen? True peace is, in fact, meaningful. If money doesn’t bring peace, then what does? Earthly possessions are not in and of themselves evil. “**Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God**” (v 19). All that we have is a gift from God.

To know this is to understand that all good things are gifts to be enjoyed. After all, we confess, **“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,”** and in so confessing we acknowledge that God’s creation is good.

To enjoy real peace is possible only through knowing that God is at peace with you. And this is his greatest gift: the gift of his Son’s words **“Peace be with you.”** No, not peace as the world thinks of peace, but peace with him. This isn’t bought with silver or gold. Rather, it is bought with something far more precious the holy, precious blood of Jesus.

Eternal things are indeed meaningful. An earthly life lived in God’s peace cannot and will not be tied to things that perish. We have an eternal soul, and that eternal soul is bound to the eternal God. God has loved us and has bound our life story to that of his own Son.

In Baptism, we were bound to the Son of God in all that he is. His earthly life was not one of earthly riches; he was, after all, born in a stable, and his only possession, his garment, became the prize for a game of lots played by the soldiers who crucified him. His earthly life was not one of selfish gain, but of sacrificial giving of himself to the poor, the needy, the hurting, the afflicted.

In Baptism, we were bound to Christ and his righteousness replacing your unrighteousness. The shedding of his innocent blood frees you and me and the world from condemnation. Even his lifeless body was placed in a tomb he did not own, given by another.

But that tomb could never hold him, for he is the Lord of Life. On Easter morning, the angels' words changed all eternity for you and me: ***“He is not here. He has risen!”*** And he who rose again even now intercedes for you as your great High Priest. This became our story, our victory, our life in and through the water of Baptism.

So, what, finally, is the meaning of life? It can never be discovered in possessions, whether they are great or small.

It is found only in that which brings peace and eternity: to know God as your heavenly Father who embraces you through the love of his Son manifested by the Spirit in Word and Sacrament. The God who created us and redeemed us does not wait for us to discover the meaning of life by looking for him. No, his love is far greater than that. He searches and finds us! No matter who we are, how confused our priorities may be, or how much we have trusted in our possessions and substituted them for God as the object of our love he is even now, this moment, coming to us. He engulfs us with his baptismal water. He speaks with the sweetest words a sinful human being can hear: **“Your sins are forgiven.”** He invites us to a meal that brings his own marriage feast to us right where we are as he gives us his body and blood.

So, what is the meaning of life? It is not in the silver and gold of this world or the things they buy. It is in knowing God and his goodness and grace that keep you every day and fill your life with hope, peace, and joy that last to eternity.

Whether we have much or little of this world's wealth, we have the wealth that matters, for we have God our Father embracing us through the love of his Son manifested by the Spirit. And that gives meaning to everything!

Amen