Sermon **Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14; 2.18-23**
August 4, 2019 **Psalm 49.1-11**
Proper 13C **Colossians 3.1-11**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 12.13-21**

From *The Message's* translation of Ecclesiastes: "Smoke, nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke."

And, from Book 1 of St. Augustine's *Confessions*: "You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You."

Last week, I observed that all baptized Christians take a vow to be constant in prayer. And, if your powers of recall are good (or my sermon was VERY memorable—Haha!), you'll remember that one of my points last Sunday was that our regular—whether weekly, or multiple times a day—praying of the "Our Father" should be seen as a one way we become members of Christ's kingdom. That is, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven"; the implication being that WE are the ones who are God's hands and feet who will make that "kingdom" a reality.

Another of our baptismal vows is to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ" (BCP, 305). What is central to our work, then, as baptized Christians is, in our various vocations, to address the world around us in the context of gospel, the Good News. And here, today, with these lessons, is the "rub" with which I've been struggling all week . . . and, even more so, given the news out of El Paso yesterday! Given the readings from Ecclesiastes, the Psalm, and the selection from Luke's Gospel (in particular), finding, and preaching on, the "<u>Good</u> <u>News</u> of God in Christ" is a challenge. Where do we see the "kingdom of God" in the hard questions that confront us?

Where, for example, is the Good News in "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This . . . is vanity" (Ec 1.22-23)? Where is the Good News in "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" (Ps 49. 9)? Where is the Good News in "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Lk 12.20)? Where is the Good News for all of the folks affected by the

Walmart shooting yesterday? The question for today seems to be "What's the point?" I wish I could take refuge in preaching on the admonition to "store up treasures in order to be rich towards God" (Lk 12.21) (which would probably make the Stewardship Committee happy). But I don't think that that would give me a passing grade on my assignment to "proclaim by word . . . the Good News".

Given all that surrounds us and that has an impact on our daily lives, I think most of us want "good news"! We want to know that our children will be safe, and grow up to be happy and fulfilled individuals. We want to know that all that we've done in our professional lives will have made a positive impact—however that might play out. We—at least as people of faith—DO want to know that either (a) we've lived as God would have us live, or (b) we're forgiven for all of the mistakes we've made. In short, we want to know that all of our living has had a reason. Goodness knows we do all that we can to hear "good news". The challenge of scripture, however, is that, while it frequently articulates these longings in ways with which we can identify, the Bible also, uncomfortably, hits at our more deeply held fears and anxieties. Today's lessons cut to the quick . . . especially for those of us who might have been kin to the original readers of Ecclesiastes or Luke's Gospel.

The first verse of Ecclesiastes is: "The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." We don't know <u>who</u> was the author; for a long time, it was thought to be Solomon (but no longer). Regardless of specific identification, the concerns of the entire book do reflect those of a royal individual, a person of means. An individual who, on the surface, would seem to "have it all"; he's a prince or king; he's wise; he's safe. And yet, he recognizes that, even with all of that, all of his "toil and strain" yield nothing but pain. There is no rest. And he concludes, "Smoke, nothing but smoke."

Many of Ecclesiastes' concerns are reflected in Luke's Gospel as well (and certainly in the passage we just heard). You may recall that Luke wrote his Gospel (as well as the Acts of the Apostles) for an otherwise unknown individual named "Theophilus". But Luke also addresses him as "Your Excellency" (1.4), which would imply that the recipient was a person of influence and stature. If that assumption is correct, we have to wonder <u>why</u> there are so many stories in Luke's Gospel that have such a negative view of wealth. Only Luke remarks that life is not found in abundant possessions. Only Luke tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Only Luke tells the story we heard today. If Theophilus commissioned Luke's Gospel, given that critique of wealth, would Theophilus have paid up? Or does Luke address a deeper concern of Theophilus'?

Part of what I'm wondering is whether or not the questions raised in Ecclesiastes and Luke's story, despite the discomfort they may cause, aren't really the questions to which we want answers? That is, is the "good news" we want to hear is that there is a "reason" behind all of this. Most of us here are relatively successful; we are "comfortable". Many of us are "self-made persons"; we've done well for ourselves. Yet, I imagine that among us—including me—are those who wonder about what we will leave behind, what's the point. We read Ecclesiastes, nod our heads in agreement with what it suggests, but then quickly put the book away, because the questions are uncomfortable. We hope Ecclesiastes doesn't show up again for another three years—except, perhaps that great passage from chapter three, made into a wonderful song popularized by The Byrds fifty years ago: "To everything, turn, turn turn". Or that admonition beloved by many, and reflected in the reading from Luke: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart" (9.7).

The rich man in Luke's story, unfortunately, is also a lot like many of us. One difference we face, however, is that we are bombarded by many voices that affirm the rich man's efforts. We are beset by what I've decided is a "Material Industrial Complex" — not the "Military Industrial Complex"! To explain this, one could point a finger at "capitalism", but Luke's story far predates that economic theory. Yet capitalism plays on our insecurities. And so, one sub-part of the broader "Material Industrial Complex" is what might be called the "Anxiety Industry": we're told to be anxious that we don't have enough, so we acquire, acquire, acquire —so much stuff—because in the "stuff" is our answer to our search for meaning—the old cliché: "whoever dies with the most toys wins". But then, with all that stuff —too much stuff, we have to summon the "De-cluttering Industry"! Either Marie Kondo, or the Swedish Death Cleaning folks, swoop in to help us let go of things that don't give us joy. And, if that doesn't work, there's the "Storage Industry" that will, like Luke's rich man believed, help us keep all of our stuff for later. But, often the time comes when, we find ourselves looking to folks like parishioner Anne McMahon for help with downsizing — often coming to the realization that all that stuff didn't get us what we really wanted; it won't prevent the inevitable. Or, in the words of the Teacher: "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ec 2.18; 1.2).

So, where is the good news? Well, I think it depends on the questions we ask. But the question Ecclesiastes, the psalmist, and the rich man all ask is one that is

quite deep. We all want to know that what we do makes a difference; that WE make a difference. And, because that question is so central to us, we'll grasp at almost any answer that pops up. But the point of the lessons this morning is that the answers provided by the Material Industrial Complex aren't the "Good News".

The book of Ecclesiastes—and this isn't a spoiler alert—is the author's examination of at all of the things he, and other wise teachers, thought would provide meaning. He then concludes that there is, indeed, wisdom to be found, but it doesn't answer the real question: "The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone (12.11-13). Ecclesiastes' answer is much the same as Jesus' summation of the story about the rich man: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Lk 12.21).

The Good News that we preach as Christians is not found in the answers provided by the society around us; they will not give us ultimate satisfaction and peace. The Good News is found in our reading from Colossians, where we read: "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" (3.2-3). We who pray the Lord's Prayer claim our place in an alternate kingdom where our meaning, our "net worth", is given by God, not by goods. And that is the "Good News" we proclaim; we don't have to toil to gain that worth. What we do have to work at, however, is to strive to bring in the Kingdom so that all may enjoy the same benefits, and so that false ideologies that result in horrors like yesterday's in El Paso are no more.

It is an age-old, and continual, quest. But St. Augustine's late fourth-century answer to the question stands the test of time. Like the author of Ecclesiastes, the psalmist and the rich man, St. Augustine was on a search for meaning, as he had found the answers his society suggested to be "smoke, nothing but smoke". He concluded: "You [God] have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You."

Amen.