

God's Presence in the Ordinary

By: Rachel Helton

May 24, 2020. Is anyone else feeling a little bit humdrum these days? During this time of physical isolation and sheltering in place, it's easy to lose track of the days and to lose track of our purpose. We might even find ourselves saying, "What is the point?" Rachel Helton preaches today on how our reading from Ecclesiastes (as well as lessons from the movie "Groundhog Day") can help us find our purpose for these monotonous days during the pandemic.

Readings: [Ecclesiastes 1:2-9](#), [Ecclesiastes 2:12-14](#), [Ecclesiastes 2:18-25](#)

*** Transcript ***

Has anyone else been waking up lately with the sound of Sonny & Cher's "I Got You Babe" playing in their head? I'm looking for Mark Ruff, because I know he put this idea in my mind a few weeks ago, and now it's happening to me. So, for those of you that know and those of you that don't know, in the movie "Groundhog Day" from the early 1990s, a self-proclaimed, under-appreciated weatherman is assigned with covering the events of February 2nd in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania when a groundhog named Phil will predict the end of winter, based on whether or not he sees his shadow. The weatherman, also named Phil, has contempt for this assignment and for the people in this small town. He's eager to get this story over with and move on to bigger and better things. But thanks to a blizzard, Phil is stuck spending an extra night in Punxsutawney. And he wakes up the next morning to find that it's February 2nd. Again.

Day after day, he wakes up in the same bed, hearing the same song playing on the clock radio: "I Got You Babe," by Sonny & Cher. He sees the same people doing the same things. It's always February 2nd. He's trapped in this sort of time loop. He goes from confusion to frustration to downright anger. He eventually starts to manipulate this reality for his own benefit — initially because it seems there are no real consequences for any of his behaviors, and then eventually because he's trying to win over his love interest. But despite his efforts, nothing ever really changes. Everything is fleeting. All is vanity.

Does this feel at all familiar? Is anyone else feeling a little bit humdrum these days? During this time of physical isolation and sheltering in place, it's easy to lose track of the days and to lose track of our purpose. We might even find ourselves saying, "What is the point?" A few Saturdays ago, I decided that our house should be cleaned from top to bottom — and everyone was going to help. About an hour in, my son Isaac said, "Mom, what are we doing? No one has been in our house for weeks. No one will be coming to our house for weeks. By the time someone can come over again, everything will be dirty. What is the point?" What is the point?

And there have been plenty of disappointments in the last few weeks too, haven't there? Field trips that didn't happen. Last days of school that meant, at least for us, picking up a garbage bag of your child's desk contents while standing six feet apart, wearing a mask, on the sidewalk in front of the school. High school graduations that are meant to celebrate achievements and years of friendship that were moved to Zoom. Family vacations canceled. Special visits from friends and family afar postponed. And then there are the casual meals around the dinner table with the friends from down the block, that are suddenly just absent from our lives.

And all this not to mention the real suffering that is happening from COVID. You're surrounded by words and images of illness and death. There's a real danger in our humdrum of becoming used to these

images and numbers, of becoming numb to the injustices of our world that mean that people living in North St. Louis, people living in poverty, people of color are being affected more harshly by this virus. We can become numb to the pain that people are feeling and the sheer magnitude of thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of deaths from this pandemic.

As we spend day after day doing the same things, inside the same walls, with the same people, without the usual moments of novelty and excitement to break things up a bit, the humdrum can feel unavoidable. In the words of Kohelet, the teacher in Ecclesiastes, what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun, and see all is vanity, a chasing after the wind. The Hebrew word "hevel" is repeated 37 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes. It's the word that's often translated as "vanity" or "meaningless." But it's perhaps better understood as "fleeting," "impermanent" — something like a vapor or a mist.

People have been searching for the meaning of life throughout all of recorded history. Kohelet searches for the meaning too. Is it our work? His answer is no. In the end, all that we work for may be handed over to someone else. Our achievements are impermanent. So, is it knowledge? I hate to tell you this, graduates, but his answer is no to this too. In the end, the person with knowledge will come to the same fate as the person without knowledge. Is it pleasure? Should we just live it up, seize the day? Is this the meaning of life? Another no. This too is fleeting. So the Book of Ecclesiastes opens with the teacher looking around and declaring that everything about life is meaningless, vaporous, fleeting, out of his control. Kohelet tries to justify his life with reason, and he just can't do it. He is honest and raw and frustrated. If nothing else, this book might teach us that God sees us in our frustrated search for meaning. We are allowed to be there. We are in fact invited to be there.

Luckily though, this isn't the end of our story. This isn't the whole picture. So what then is the meaning? Where then can be our hope? Despite the fact that nothing about our existence is guaranteed, that there are limitations to our earthly life, God is limitless. Even in the mundane, simple activities of our daily existence, it is God's presence that makes life meaningful. It is God's presence that moves our activities from ordinary to holy, and creates purpose out of our willingness to use our lives to serve others. The ability to find not just purpose, but joy in our purpose and in our very existence, is a gift from God — a gift to be received but not possessed. When we surrender our time, our efforts, our simple moments to God — not expecting a reward, not expecting productivity or end results, but simply having faith that God will be active in our lives — this makes hope and life and meaning eternal.

Kohelet writes in chapter 2, verse 24, "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" Eating, drinking, working, enjoying — these can be acts of faith, faith in the eternal. This is where we, like Jesus, may become glorified by God, and bring glory to God, in this very moment, however boring and humdrum it may feel.

So is the work the meaning of life? No, but we should do work that's meaningful and that serves others. Is knowledge the meaning of life. No, but we should pursue wisdom that helps us to understand God's purposes for creation. Is pleasure the meaning of life? No, but we should enjoy the pleasures of life knowing that they are gifts from God.

In a moment, we'll pray together the Lord's Prayer, and we will ask God to provide our daily bread. We are asking God for the ordinary things that sustain our lives. We are surrendering to the fact that in the

absence of God, the cosmos is repetitive, weary, fleeting. But God's presence in the ordinary, God's presence in our eating and drinking, in our work and in our enjoyment, makes it meaningful. This is the wisdom of God that has the power to sustain us. This is our daily bread.

As the movie "Groundhog Day" moves on, Bill Murray's character starts to be transformed. He starts to do things not for himself, but for other people. And he starts to surrender to the fact that he does not have the power to change his situation. With this acknowledgement of his own limitations, and his shift from serving himself to serving others, he finally wakes up to February 3rd. In the final scene of the movie, Phil steps out onto the street — the same street that he's been stepping out onto, day after day after day — always the same gray, detestable street. But today it's new. He sees the world suddenly in a new way, and he looks around and he says, "It's beautiful. Let's live here."

As we step into week 11 of COVID isolation, instead of focusing on the day when all will be back to normal — whatever that may mean — what if instead, we took a deep breath, quieted our anxious minds, allowed ourselves to ask what purpose does God have for this day? What meaning can God bring to this monotonous, humdrum, fleeting day, and all the simple moments in it? We just might find ourselves looking around our weary world, seeing God's promises of justice, hope, love, and saying to ourselves, "It's beautiful. Let's live here."

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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