



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

ARE YOU GOING TO VANITY FAIR?

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ AUGUST 27, 2017

For our scripture reading this morning, I want us to witness two different English translations of the same portion of the Old Testament in ancient Hebrew. The book is called Ecclesiastes, a word meaning “teacher.” It was written by the great King Solomon, reputed to be the world’s wisest man, and is a reflection on the meaning of life and how to find our place within it. The first reading will be from the New Revised Standard Version (which is found in our pew racks).

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3)

The second approach will be from the contemporary New Living Translation, which is one of the biggest sellers in our bookstore. The same passage reads:

These are the words of the Teacher, King David’s son, who ruled in Jerusalem: “Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “completely meaningless!” What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3)

Pilgrim’s Progress

A popular British folk song dating from the 1600s was rediscovered by modern composers and singers, and has been recorded by many artists—including the rock duo Simon and Garfunkel and, more recently, the Irish ensemble Celtic Woman. It’s called “Scarborough Fair” and is a beautiful, haunting melody—many of you, I’m sure, would recognize it.

The town of Scarborough, located in Yorkshire in northern England, was the site of a huge regional marketplace, a gathering of people from all around. The love song “Scarborough Fair” was set in that time and place. If you want to identify a modern equivalent, Scarborough Fair would have been a 17th century version of the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota—or any other large regional commercial and retail center. The title of my message today, jumping off from this song, is “Are You Going to Vanity Fair?” A man named John Bunyan, who lived in that same century in England and was the author of the first Christian best-selling novel ever written (titled “Pilgrim’s Progress”) describes a place he termed Vanity Fair. I’ll describe it to you in a moment.

But first, let’s review the story of John Bunyan and his groundbreaking book, which we began to talk about last Sunday. He was a commoner from central England, who grew up in a craftsman’s home and served for awhile in the nation’s military. On his discharge from the service, he began working in his father’s trade, while struggling to find himself. After a time of self-study of the Bible, he made a serious and thorough commitment to Christ. He wanted to share with his friends and neighbors what he’d discovered in his new faith, but the official state church told him that preaching was something that must be left to the professionals—and that reading the Bible was dangerous for anyone who hadn’t been to the proper schools. So John started preaching and teaching in town squares and in fields and in people’s homes, leading many people to their own personal faith.

The established church leaders, threatened by his enthusiasm and his success, framed him on false charges of sedition and had him thrown in jail. While in his cell, he began to write the book that became “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Later, on his release, he became a pastor and wrote another half-dozen books that spread across England. His nation experienced a powerful spiritual revival during that time.

The book “Pilgrim’s Progress” describes the Christian life as being like a journey through this world to our eternal heavenly home. And the journey is not just a comfortable excursion trip; it is filled with a wide range of experiences, both uplifting and challenging. Along the way, the main character named “Christian” is met by many fellow-travelers who help and encourage him. But he also has to overcome many obstacles and defeat many enemies of his soul.

Memorable Images on the Journey

Bunyan warns us in an allegory or imaginative description what some of the common difficulties might be as we try to live as a Christian in an often-hostile or unsupportive world. One of the memorable challenges is the “Swamp of Depression” (in old-fashioned wording, the “Slough of Despond”). Our emotions do indeed go up and down. Some of us here have had to deal with a time of significant emotional depression—perhaps even what a psychiatrist has diagnosed as “clinical depression.” But those who have never had a true chemical imbalance still can struggle with the ups and downs of the emotional roller coaster of life. John Bunyan helps us to recognize the power of emotions, but also to realize that they are too fickle and undependable to base our faith upon. In the “swamp of depression” we have to find the sure footing of faith in the truth of God’s Word as a place to set our feet—The scriptures become our stepping stones to get us through the marshy and dangerous ground safely. It’s a reminder to trust not in our fickle emotions, but in the solid facts of the promises of God.

Another danger we are warned about in “Pilgrim’s Progress” comes in the form of a self-assured and sophisticated person named “Worldly Wiseman.” He tries to turn Christian away from the path of faith by telling him that religion shouldn’t be taken too seriously. Listen to the wise and experienced people of the world, he lectures him. The successful people, the ones who have really “made it” in life, are the ones who keep their beliefs to themselves. They are the

“elite,” the in-crowd, the ones you want to be like. Peer pressure and the urge to conform and gain approval from others are powerful in every generation. Worldly Wiseman’s words are seductive and his invitation seems so subtly appealing, until Christian the spiritual traveler realizes that pursuing the world’s wisdom is a slippery slope that will lead him away from trusting in the Lord.

One additional prominent danger featured in “Pilgrim’s Progress” is Doubting Castle. Within its forbidding walls Christian is captured by the Giant Despair, the cruel master of the castle, and thrown in its dungeon. The doubts bombard his ears and his mind: “How can you believe in a God you can’t see? Isn’t it all a myth or fairy tale? There is no hope, and no eternal life, and death is just the end of everything.” In our times, some three and a half centuries later, we too have to face doubts and criticisms and misunderstandings about our faith.

All of these, and many other challenges that John Bunyan describes, can come to us along the journey through life. But perhaps the most famous and notorious of the spiritual obstacles is the great marketplace Vanity Fair. It was the shopping district of the city of Vanity, a place Christian and his companion Faithful had to pass through on their way to the Celestial City. The term Vanity came from the beginning of our scripture text in Ecclesiastes. In some contexts “vanity” means pride or arrogance; but in this context it means something that is without meaning or purpose. An amateur golfer might lament “I tried to break par in vain”—meaning that he or she will never be good enough to reach that goal—and if they base their enjoyment of the sport on achieving it, they will only be frustrated. To label something as “vanity” means it is ultimately empty.

Exploring “Vanity Fair”

The phrase “Vanity Fair” is most widely known in modern America as the name of a New York-based glossy magazine. It was founded in 1983, and is known for risqué photos, avant-garde opinions, liberal political commentary, and trendy fashion—openly catering to the

coastal cultural elites. The magazine is often controversial, and sometime in legal trouble due to its relentless pushing of boundaries of decency and tradition. *Vanity Fair* magazine is an exemplar of American materialism, celebrity worship, and the pursuit of the “good life” as its editors define it.

And the irony is that the very name comes from the classic Christian novel that identifies Vanity Fair as the symbol of all that is morally corrupt and spiritually bankrupt. My hunch is that the publishers and the readers of that magazine have no clue where their title comes from.

Here’s how John Bunyan describes the original Vanity Fair:

This fair is not a newly erected business but is actually an ancient enterprise, founded by Beelzebub himself (to seduce and destroy gullible humans). It is open all day long, every day of the year. At this fair they sell such merchandise as houses, lands, honors, promotions, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts and pleasures of all sorts, including such things as silver, gold, diamonds and pearls. At this fair there is constant round-the-clock entertainment: juggling, gambling, games, plays, clowns, mimics, tricksters, rogues and amusements of every kind. Here visitors can find free offers that include thefts, murders, adulteries, perjuries, and all of them in attractive shapes and colors.

In “Pilgrim’s Progress,” Christian and Faithful are attacked by a mob at the fair because they refuse to indulge in the vanity and worthlessness of what was being offered to them. The message of this memorable part of their story: materialism, and the pursuit of wealth and pleasure and man-made glory and success, will all prove, when we come to the end of our lives, to have been of no lasting value. As Jesus said to a man caught up in his own “Vanity Fair” of the first century, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world, and lose his soul in the process?”

The Biblical Perspective

This same wisdom and perspective is what came to King Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, at the end of his desperate search for meaning and happiness. He describes to us his attempts in his own “Vanity Fair.” Solomon, as seen in both the historical records of his time and in his own account here in his book, was the richest, smartest, most successful man of his generation. He had it all. He knew power and public acclaim, the adoration of women, the fulfillment of great building programs and political influence, the pleasures of every physical enjoyment money could buy. So why was he not satisfied? Why did he conclude it was all “vanity” or “meaningless”? We get the answer from this wise guide when we come to the end of chapter 2, his summary of his search.

So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. For who can eat and enjoy anything apart from Him? God gives wisdom, knowledge and joy to those who please Him.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

Here is thus the true and right perspective on life that the Bible brings to us (from the teachings of Solomon and Jesus, from Moses and David and Isaiah in the Old Testament and Paul and Peter and James in the New)—a perspective that John Bunyan echoed in “Pilgrim’s Progress” so many centuries later, and is relevant to us today. All the things of this world combined cannot completely satisfy our spiritual hunger for meaning and purpose and fulfillment. They are all just things, things that will not last. Many of the objects and experiences the world offers are not wrong in themselves. And if they are received as gifts of God and kept in the proper perspective, they enrich us and bring joy. But when we worship the created things rather than the Creator; when we make them our sole desire and object of longing; when we expect them to fulfill that God-shaped hole in our soul, they will always disappoint.

One of my favorite Bible scholars (who happens to be the now-retired president of Gordon Conwell Seminary in Boston, where our church has developed a close partnership for training future leaders) is Dr. Walt Kaiser. He wrote a wonderful book about the lessons for us from Ecclesiastes. And he offers what I think may be the best translation of the key word of the book. While some versions capture Solomon's lament as "vanity," and others as "meaningless," this scholar says that the proper term for all of earthly life apart from God is "empty."

I believe that sums it up perfectly. There is nothing wrong with houses and boats and cars, with titles and positions and honor and respect, with food and drink and vacations and sports and amusements. They can all be enjoyed properly **when God fills them**. But apart from Him they are empty. And life becomes a fruitless search for meaning apart from its only true Source. ■

