

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2013

“Vanity of vanities. . . vanity of vanities! All things are vanity! Here is one who has labored with wisdom and knowledge and skill, and yet to another who has not labored over it, he must leave property. This also is vanity and a great misfortune. For what profit comes to man from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which he has labored under the sun? All his days sorrow and grief are his occupation; even at night his mind is not at rest. This also is vanity.”

How many times have you not felt like this? You look around and you wonder why you bothered, because either it all seems to end in ways you neither expected nor wanted or there doesn't seem to be much point to any of it anyway. Life can, at times, just seem futile .

When moments like that occur, we should stand up, raise our hands, and thank God that we are being forced to ask the question, “Is there really such a thing as hope in my life- something more than just whistling in the dark as I walk past the graveyard of my own life? Is there some way that I can learn to trust in the mercy of God while looking despair and bitterness and self-pity square in the eye?” The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes has done us a great favor by articulating what all of us, or at least most of us, feel, at one time or another, but which we often are too afraid to speak aloud- that life is nothing more than the passing of seconds and minutes and hours and days without any real meaning or purpose, and that “the real winner is the one who”, as that terribly cynical bumper-sticker puts it, “the one who dies with the most toys”.

The real journey towards hope does, in fact, often begin with the sentiment expressed in the passage from Ecclesiastes- at a time of cynicism- at a time maybe when someone precious to you has died, or you have lost your job, or your sense of purpose in life, or maybe when you have been unfairly passed over, or slighted or even betrayed by someone you trusted as a friend. You may be living under a heavy cloud of depression or you may have an addiction that just won't let go but controls your life in ways you wish it didn't. Even when life is not so desperate, you can wonder whether just the ordinary ups-and-downs and rough-and-tumble of daily living that can seem like a roller coaster ride are really necessary. Is there not some way to find greater equilibrium and a deeper, steadier current in life? In other words, what is the answer we give *inside ourselves* to the question raised by the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes about life's vanity, it's uselessness? If we are to live authentic lives as Christian people, at some point, we need to respond to the preacher, if only to ourselves.

I have found Cynthia Bourgeault's reflections in her book, *Mystical Hope. Trusting in the Mercy of God*, to be very helpful in thinking about this problem, and showing us the road towards a deep and lasting hope and how we might actually find joy in the very midst of disappointment. Her book is well worth reading.

The way that we usually look at things, she says, is that hope is tied to outcomes- a sense that things will get better in the future- that job I'm hoping for will come through for me, the contract I was anticipating will be granted, the biopsy will prove negative, the person I've been having real problems with will begin to respond in the way I like. But if things don't work out- there is no job, there is no cure, there is no positive response , then the situation can seem, as we say, "hopeless".

The Bible knows plenty about this usual kind of hoping. “I will love the Lord,” the psalmist says, “because he has heard the voice of my supplication. . . I was brought very low, and he helped me” (Psalm 116:1,5) Or, when the Israelites find themselves between a rock and hard place as they were pursued by Pharaoh’s armies, the sea parted and the way was miraculously opened for their escape into freedom. These kind of things can indeed happen, but not always. Where do they leave us in our own lives when the biopsy comes back malignant, when the marriage falls apart, when the pink slip is put under my door, when there are no miraculous interventions? Not only does the situation seem hopeless, but then it can also seem as if our religion is nonsense and God has abandoned us.

There is, however, another kind of hope that we find in the scriptures, one that is almost a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. Beneath the upbeat, triumphalist kind of hope that parts the sea and trusts that everything will just turn out for the best, at least for us good guys, there is another kind of hope that somehow sees into the wellsprings of life *despite* whatever is happening. At the end of the Old Testament book of Habakkuk at the conclusion of a long litany of doom with the way things are going in the land, the prophet suddenly exclaims:

¹⁷ *Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

Now here is a reversal of the way we usually respond to things. It's almost as bad as things can get in Habakkuk's day- no crops, no flocks, no food- not a good scenario in a desert land. And yet Habakkuk's response is not depression, not resentment, not looking around and bemoaning life, no "vanity of vanities, everything is vanity". It's not even some stoic kind of "let's get through this, boys" with an English stiff upper lip approach to endurance. Despite everything, despite all the hopelessness of the situation, there is almost a spring in his step- "like the feet of a deer", and his path leads upwards, not downwards; God makes him walk up to the heights. There is almost an "incredible lightness of being" in the way Habakkuk is responding.

This same kind of hope is reflected in the folktale book of Job, when Job, after the agony of his ordeal has finally settled in and he is sitting destitute amid the wreckage of what once was his life, he exclaims: "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.*" Perhaps nowhere in all of human literature is there such a triumphant statement of hope. Job's hope is not tied to a good outcome that he sees just around the bend. His whole life has collapsed and even God seems to stand against him, and yet, yet, something is singing in his soul that can't be stamped out and it can't be stopped.

So what is the difference between what might be called the "mystical hope" that Habakkuk and Job, and Jesus and others seem to be able to have in the *very midst* of loss and disaster and the hope that we usually have but which is so quickly snuffed out when all the verdicts around us are negative and we are tempted, like the preacher in

the book of Ecclesiastes to cry out, “useless, useless, it’s all useless”? What’s the difference?

The mystical hope of Habakkuk, Job, and others like them is not tied to a good future outcome they can see happening on the next step of the journey. Their hope seems to have a life of its own, *despite* external circumstances and conditions that push against them. Their hope has something to do with what might be called “*presence*”, the experience of being met, being held by something intimately at hand. They neither rush ahead into the future nor shrink back into the past. Rather, they somehow seem capable of living in the *present*, and in the present being able to feel the flutter of the wings of the Spirit and to sense the hand of God pressing into their lives. To live in hope, it seems to me, means that we learn to *lean* into the *presence that is at hand* and to trust that it can and it will hold us in the midst of whatever we are experiencing.

It certainly is, however, far easier to stand in the tradition of the preacher in Ecclesiastes and bemoan the fact that life often sucks. Just as I was writing this homily, three different things out of the blue went wrong, and I immediately felt the pull to feel relief only if they could be corrected and sorted out. That would certainly be my default approach to hope. But this time I caught myself, and so I went back to those words of Habbakuk and I began pondering them again. And I asked myself: “What will you do when things can’t be fixed? What will you lean into? What will you hope in?” How can my default “it’s all bloody useless” be transformed into “*yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation?*” How can that happen? It’s worth thinking about!