

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER¹
The Sunday Next Before Advent

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher.³

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

“Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow them-

selves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity. And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd. And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the nineteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.⁴

“When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 45 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xli (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xl (CIPBC 1963).

³ Ecclesiastes 11:1—12:14 (KJV).

⁴ St. John 19:13-end (KJV).

⁵ Hebrews 11:1-16 (KJV).

⁶ Ecclesiastes 12: 13b (KJV).

⁷ Ecclesiastes 12: 8 (KJV).

⁸ Ecclesiastes 11: 9 (RSV).

⁹ Ecclesiastes 12: 13b (KJV).

¹⁰ Assisting Priest, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune MS. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

[**GABB-uh-thuh**]. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith [**SETH**] unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith [**SETH**] unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha [**GALL-guh-thuh**]: Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.

“And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written.

“Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith [**SETH**], They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did.

“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas [**KLEE-oh-puhs**], and Mary Magdalene [*magg-duh-LEE-neh*]. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith [**SETH**] unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith [**SETH**] he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.

“After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith **[SETH]**, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost. The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith **[SETH]** true, that ye might believe. For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken. And again another scripture saith **[SETH]**, They shall look on him whom they pierced.

“And after this Joseph of Arimathaea **[air-ih-muh-THEE* -muh]**, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus **[nick-uh-DEE-muss]**, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh **[MURR]** and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”

* Using the breathy “th” sound as in “three”, not the hard one as in the article “the”.

Life is no different than are those games. If life did not have a clear endpoint, it would have no purpose. It is significant, I think, that I could have reworded that to say “If life did not have a clear endpoint, it would have no point”, which would mean the same thing without being in any way tautologous.

And life certainly does have defined rules, which are what we spend a great part of our time in church teaching and discussing. It is the inventor of a game who has the privilege of writing the rule book for that game and where God is the creator of our lives, He is the author of the rules by which we must live it.

Conclusion:

I have no doubt whatever that the ancient Hebrews had games and played them, although the only one of which I myself am aware is a little child’s game played during the Hannukah season with a small spinning top that chooses alternatives somewhat as dice do in many of our games.

But it is certain that the Preacher – now we are speaking of the capitalized “Preacher” who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes – would have recognized the importance both of a clear ending point and of definite, enforceable rules, for it was in that spirit that he wrote, “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”⁹

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister¹⁰
November 21, 2010.

¹ This was originally written as a sermon for Evening Prayer on the Sunday next before Advent, according to the American lectionary of 1943.

selves cannot read what it is. We begin to wear out the moment we are born and, as surely as God made little green apples but not big 24-karat gold ones, every single one of us will die. Each morning we awaken puts us one day closer to that moment of death.

I do not say this to be melancholy or unpleasant. Quite the contrary: the realization that life is finite can be a very reassuring thought. Hard as it is for the young to grasp this idea, living forever would not be an unmitigated blessing. Indeed, as any extremely elderly person can easily tell you, it is entirely possible to reach an age when one has experienced so much that living much longer does not seem to be particularly important. Then the quality of each day spent is far more important to the one spending it than is the number of days that may follow it.

Indeed, it is characteristic of much in human life that a worthwhile thing must have a definite and easily identifiable terminus and that the point of that thing is how well and properly we have worked to reach that terminus. Just think of any game that engages great numbers of people: each such game has at least two things. One is a clearly defined end point and the other is an elaborate system of rules to tell us how one is to reach that endpoint.

No one would either play or watch such a game if it did not have a guaranteed end for there would be no point to it; in fact, such an ending is so important that some games assure it by defining their duration as a set period of time. Those that do not have specified time periods assure their completion within a reasonable time by specifying a set number of activities that define one game or a maximum score that cannot be exceeded. Nor would anyone wish to play or watch a game that had no end nor one that was not structured by accepted customs and conventions, that is, by rules.

Or,

Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.⁵

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report. Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh. By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith. By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and

embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity”⁷ may be one of the Bible’s best-known lines for which no one can cite the source. If you ask fifty people whence it comes, I would hazard that at least forty-five would guess “Proverbs”. Yet probably almost all fifty could recognize the underlying message of that verse, which is how transient are the good things of this world.

By itself, that thought is not an inappropriate reflection for us to consider today, as we prepare for next Sunday and the beginning of a new penitential season of Advent. But in the context of this morning’s First Lesson, is not by itself. Instead, the Preacher draws from it a very specific lesson for us: “Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.”⁸

It is that judgment, and the certainty that it will come to each of us, that is the bottom line of Ecclesiastes’ account, the final thought we need to take with us as we begin Advent. Indeed, one of the traditional duties of a preacher – that’s “preacher” with a lower-case “p”, not the capitalized “Preacher” who is the author of the book of Ecclesiastes – one of the duties of a preacher is every so often to remind the people of the Church of what we call the Four Last Things.

These Four Last Things are the ultimate realities for every Christian. They are Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. Each of us will experience personally three of those four Things. We each will die, we each will be judged, and the purpose of the Christian life is to try to see to it that our third of those realities is Heaven and not Hell.

In our current society, it is fashionable to mock such thoughts. No one, the shapers of opinion tell us, will really be condemned to Hell for that could not be the action of a loving God. At most we will suffer the shame of being unfashionable because we have not dedicated our lives to the causes that are momentarily deemed significant or desirable.

And, of course, for most who think that way, being considered out of fashion is a fate far worse than death. Death, after all, can only take away our lives and our bodies but failing to identify and adopt the latest intellectual fads will cost us our social positions. What good would life be if it had to be lived without social esteem and prestige?

That, I trust you will recognize, was a sarcastic rhetorical question, one that I do not expect you to answer and, if you did feel moved to answer it, I would certainly hope you would not, indeed could not, be so shallow as to explain just why the life without celebrity is a life not worth having.

The truth is we are created as products that have a built in “sell by” date stamped on them, although we our-