
A Chasing After Wind

The Very Reverend Sam G. Candler

**For St. George's Anglican Church
Magnetawan, Ontario
Ecclesiastes 1:1, 12-14**

"The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

"I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done
under heaven;
it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.
I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun;
and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind."

How amazing it is that the Book of Ecclesiastes is even in the Bible. It is a dark and skeptical book, known primarily for its despair that anything worthwhile can come of our earthly strivings. "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," it begins, and it does not let up. Everything is futile. There was a time when the Jewish rabbis were against including it in Holy Scripture.

Today, it is known as one the "wisdom" books of the Bible, including the Book of Psalms, Proverbs, The Song of Solomon, and maybe even Job. The wisdom books of the Bible don't tell supernatural stories and miracles; they contain natural philosophy and an ordinary, earthly wisdom. If you know the Bible at all, you know that these books are not always cheery and hopeful. Instead, they represent humanity's search for God in a deeply intellectual way, a hard, realistic way.

I love the book of Ecclesiastes, maybe ever since Pete Seeger wrote that great song of the sixties, "Turn, Turn, Turn." "To Everything There Is a Season," The lyrics of that song are almost entirely taken from Ecclesiastes:

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, a time to reap that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

In fact, Pete Seeger donates 45% of the royalties of that song to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, because he admits that, except for the music itself, he contributed only six words of the lyrics. Those are the lyrics that appear at the end of the song, "I swear it's not too late."

When the Byrds recorded that song in 1965, and it hit number one on the charts, it was proclaimed the number one pop hit with the oldest lyrics ever, because they dated way back to Ecclesiastes. The great line was that King Solomon had written a number one hit, since it was supposed that King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes.

But Solomon probably did not write Ecclesiastes. It was someone called, simply, Qoheleth, which means "the preacher." He is called the preacher not like we might call Billy Graham the preacher. Qoheleth is a wise and crusty old man preacher, who does not seem to have a church at all; instead, he gazes sardonically at the world and speaks a wisdom that is self-authenticating. He does not need ordination, because everyone realizes immediately that his words ring true. He is the fool

on the hill.

Even if they are dark and sometimes faithless, the words of the preacher, Qoheleth, ring true.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," he says. "I, the Preacher, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind."

"A chasing after wind." These words are worth reading every year, or even every month. The Book of Ecclesiastes has an edge, a dark side. It reflects the dark side of our souls. Remember, the dark side is not necessarily the bad side. It's just the dark side, which, when we know it well, enables us to see the light all the better. When we know our own dark side, we are better able to know the light.

Ecclesiastes is like the poetry of great Canadian singer, Leonard Cohen. It is dark and sharp, revealing secrets that we would rather not admit. So, Ecclesiastes is the Leonard Cohen of the Bible.

"Everybody knows," Leonard Cohen wrote, "Everybody knows that the boat is leaking, everybody knows the captain lied./Everybody got this broken feeling, like their father or their dog just died."

"Everybody knows. That's how it goes."

"Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything."

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity."

It is a chasing after wind, a chasing after wind. We all know that empty and frustrating experience. It is disheartening to be always searching, and to have that inner, gnawing feeling that our search is futile. All is vanity; all is empty. The Hebrew word for "vanity" is "vapor," like an airy mist, a slight breath, that disappears.

Our search often presents the frightening possibility that perhaps we will not find anything. What if we have searched for ourselves all our lives and realized that we have not found anything yet? This is the truly desperate realization, a calamitous one. A chasing after wind.

But, this morning, I have another angle. I have another angle on what it means to chase after the wind. I have another direction from which that wind might blow.

The word for wind in the Bible is actually the same word as Spirit. "Ruah" in Hebrew and "Pneuma" in Greek. From Genesis to Jesus, the word for Spirit is the same word as wind. The Holy Spirit is often compared to the wind.

Across the world, throughout time, the wind rolls in. Sometimes from the ocean, sometimes from across the plains. Always the wind develops from the perpetual spinning of our earth on its axis. Movement is being generated. Clouds are gathering, but clouds are also dissipating. The wind blows in fair weather and inclement weather alike.

And there are times, beautiful times, when it is good to chase after the wind. Sailors on this lovely lake surely chase after the wind in our dinghies and sunfishes. We were chasing after the wind just this past week, just as Ecclesiastes says. Some of us look for the wind the moment we step out of our cabins or cottages.

The wind can be decidedly dark and negative. Like all of you, I can remember some scary storms on Ahmic Lake. I've seen a grove of trees leveled by a microburst. I have tried to paddle a slippery canoe against whitecapped waves being driven by a west wind.

The wind can flow right through you and reveal secrets you would rather not admit.

But the wind can also refresh. It can be the delightful refreshment on a hot summer afternoon. It can blow clouds in, but it can also blow clouds out. All this, I believe, is part of the identity of the Holy Spirit, the identity of God. God is in the wind.

When I spoke with my assistant this past week, I told her that I had sailed with my cousin in the Kelly Cup race, but that I had not done too well. The lovely Judy Johnson replied, "Does that mean you didn't go very fast? Maybe that's just because you were enjoying it longer."

That's now my line of the summer. I was just enjoying the wind longer (what there was of it). The next time you step outside, stop and sense the wind. Enjoy it. At that moment, you might realize something else: the ultimate reality is not us chasing after the wind. The ultimate reality is that the wind is chasing after us. It is the wind, the breath of God, the Holy Spirit of God, who is chasing after us.

I read the Book of Ecclesiastes earlier this summer, when I was on my annual sabbatical. That sabbatical is always a time for me to leave civilization in order to search for the wind again.

And this summer has revealed something about wind to me. I have been chasing after wind my entire life. In school, in relationships, in jobs, on hiking and canoe trips, in churches, in sports, in my writing and my own preaching.

I have been looking for something, searching, chasing after something that-most of the time-I cannot quite define. I have been chasing after the wind, just as Ecclesiastes says. All is vanity and a chasing after wind. The same fate befalls the wise and the foolish, The Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, the rich and the poor, the smart and the stupid, the slow and the fast. All is vanity.

I have been chasing after wind. But I sure do enjoy it. Something in me knows that this chasing after wind is really a search for spirit. The wind is Spirit, a Spirit which can enliven and invigorate us with passion, even if we sense just a slight breath of it.

I think Jesus actually knew the Book of Ecclesiastes quite well. He knew about its wisdom, and he also knew about its references to wind. One night, in the dark, he told the old man Nicodemus, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3.7-8)

In today's gospel, when Jesus speaks of a rich man who says to his soul, "Soul! Eat, drink, and be merry," it is perhaps an allusion to Ecclesiastes. Jesus is building on that reference when he says that a person's life does not consist of an abundance of possessions. Jesus is speaking to the soul. Remember, the soul is that part of us that seeks and senses Spirit. (Luke 12.13-21).

One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 104, which is really a praise anthem to all of creation. Verses 3 and 4 say of God,

"You set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
You make the winds your messengers."

Oh, Pete Seeger, in his time, wrote plenty more songs, including one called "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" The answer, as you may have heard, is blowing in the wind.

All this is testimony that if we study the wisdom books long enough, if seek the ordinary wind long enough, we will touch the Holy Wind, the Holy Spirit. If we study ordinary Nature long enough, we will be studying Supernature, the supernatural.

The answer is out there, blowing in the wind, carried on the wings of the wind. I say let's keep chasing after wind. It's not always vanity to chase the wind. It is a spiritual and deeply satisfying pursuit. It is the pursuit that leads to spirit and to energy, to the breath of God, to the Holy Spirit, of eternal life.

AMEN.

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