

Sermon for Evening Prayer¹
The Sunday Next Before Advent
(Trinity XXV, 2010)

Lessons:²

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

“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 themselves, 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 music 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....

“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 Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.⁴

“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over

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¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xli (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Ecclesiastes 11: 9—12: 8, 13-14 (KJV).

⁴ Hebrews 13: 1-21 (KJV).

⁵ Ecclesiastes 12: 13b (KJV).

⁶ Ecclesiastes 12: 8 (KJV).

⁷ Ecclesiastes 11: 9 (RSV).

⁸ Ecclesiastes 12: 13b (KJV).

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score that cannot be exceeded. Nor would anyone with 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.

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 functions in somewhat the same way a die does or a pair of 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.”⁸

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you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”⁵

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”⁶ 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 les-

son 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.”⁷

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 ourselves 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