



“Divine Mystery”

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Ecclesiastes 1:2-6, 12-14, 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21

Frederick Buechner recalls a time in his life when he was ripe for a revelation of God. Through a character — The Reverend Nicolet — in one of his novels, (*The Final Beast*, 1965) Buechner describes what happened as he lay in a field of grass on a warm, sunlit afternoon anticipating an encounter with God.

“Two apple branches struck against each other with the limber clack of wood on wood. That was all — a tick-tock rattle of branches — but then a fierce lurch of excitement at what was only daybreak, only the smell of summer coming, only starting back again for home, but oh Jesus, he thought, with a great lump in his throat and a crazy grin, it was an agony of gladness and beauty falling wild and soft like rain. Just clack-clack, but praise him, he thought. Praise him. Maybe all his journeying, he thought, had been only to bring him here to hear two branches hit each other twice like that, to see nothing cross the threshold but to see the threshold, to hear the dry clack-clack of the world’s tongue at the approach of the approach of splendor.”

Upon reflection about this experience, Buechner writes (in *The Alphabet of Grace*, 1970):
 “In just such a place on just such a day I lay down in the grass with just such wild expectations. Part of what it means to believe in God, at least part of what it means for me, is to believe in the possibility of miracle, and because of a variety of circumstances I had a very strong feeling at that moment that the time was ripe for miracle, my life was ripe for miracle, and the very strength of the feeling itself seemed a kind of vanguard of miracle. Something was going to happen — something extraordinary that I could perhaps even see and hear.... But the sunshine was too bright, the air too clear, some residual skepticism in myself too sharp to make it possible

to imagine ghosts among the apple trees or voices among the yellow jackets, and nothing like what I expected happened at all... Those apple branches knocked against each other, went clack-clack. No more. No less. ‘The dry clack-clack of the world’s tongue at the approach of the approach of splendor.’”

Most of us have moments like that. Punctuated moments in our day to day living when we find ourselves taking a step back, pausing to take stock in where we are and where we’re going— could be a few minutes or maybe a particular day, or maybe even weeks or months in a season of our lives —times when we feel drawn to reflect on the deeper meaning of life.

I have a feeling that the author of Ecclesiastes may have been in the same situation. In Hebrew this book of the Bible is called Koheleth, and that is the name scholars give to the author too. Koheleth means teacher or the one who addresses the assembly. We don’t really know much more about Koheleth, but this part of the book is written in the first person — a reflection of his own thoughts. Perhaps Koheleth, too was ripe for a revelation of God. Perhaps he too lay down in grassy fields, went for solitary walks along a shady stream, or looked for images in the sand-swept desert, hoping to learn something more about God and the meaning of human existence. And maybe, like Buechner, he did not experience what he expected to. Instead, he experienced the ordinary work of ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. He reflected on this and tried to make sense of it.

What he came to realize was that human strivings were not the source of meaning in life. That recognition led him to believe that “all is vanity.” That word “vanity” in Hebrew means emptiness, or vapor, or breath, or wind. It’s like the old Bob Dylan wartime song — *Blowin’ in the Wind*. “How many seas must a white dove sail before she sleeps in the sand? How many times must the canon balls fly before they’re forever banned?” Except today it is not just the white doves, but people trying to cross the seas; instead of cannonballs, it’s bullets flying in neighborhoods, shopping malls, schools and summertime food festivals. And still the answers to these questions evade us — blowin’ in the wind.

Lurking beneath these questions is an even more profound question: what gives meaning to life? That is the question that Koheleth struggles with fiercely. He looks for answers in the life he knows. He considers people who labor at work they enjoy and others who toil at tedious tasks they dislike, and he realizes that ultimately it doesn’t matter. He considers all the wisdom that he has acquired over a lifetime, and realizes that surely others before him had learned as much, and future generations will one day know as much or more. He considers the possessions he has acquired and the things he has grown to value and cherish over a lifetime, and he realizes that some day others will inherit these things who may not appreciate their value. He considers the principles he stands for and the hard work he has done, and he realizes others may come after him who undo the best of what he has been able to achieve.

This moment in the political history of our country feels a lot like that to me. Many hard won efforts over many years seem to be unravelling — whether in areas of women’s reproductive rights, or race relations, or fair housing, or living wages, or trade, or environmental ethics, or access to quality education, not to mention the global implications of all these challenges.

In the world of Ecclesiastes, every situation seems to lead to the same conclusion: Vanity, pointless; emptiness. Ecclesiastes resonates with Sartre and other existentialists who lament the meaninglessness of life. This is one author who would appreciate those infamous bumper stickers: “Life’s a _____ (fill in your favorite expletive), and then you die.”

Have you ever felt like that? Like the circumstances of your life seem purely coincidental. Like no matter what you do, it’s not going to matter in the big picture? Like somewhere along the way, you’ve missed the point? I think that is a very human experience. Those are not the kinds of thoughts that often get preached from pulpits or recited in scripture. That philosophy seems better suited to bumper stickers than Bible study. In fact, it’s a bit surprising that the book of Ecclesiastes even made it into the Bible with thoughts like these. But, I’m glad it did. Because there’s a lot to be learned from wrestling with these kinds of questions.

“Vanity of vanities” is a juncture point: when you come to the point in your life where it seems all is vanity, you can go one of two ways. You can give up in despair. Or you can strive for something beyond what you know. The author of Ecclesiastes confesses to not understand the way things are in the world, and at times even seems despairing about the consequences of human life, yet, he did not ultimately give up. He continued to value life— if only to say that it is a gift of God. And continued to believe in God— even if he could not explain God’s ways.

Most people seem to desire concrete things. We take pride in things. Our jobs, our kids, our homes our incomes. In this morning’s lectionary readings pair this text from Ecclesiastes with the parable of the “Rich Fool” from Luke’s gospel. They seem to go together— one providing commentary on the other.

The parable tells of a rich man, who happens to come into an abundance of wealth when his field produces a bumper crop. But, despite the man’s good fortune, he has a dilemma, because his barns are too small to hold all the crops. So, he decides to tear down his old barns to build new ones, figuring this way he’ll be able to store up the excess goods and eat, drink, and be merry for the rest of his life. But, of course, in the parable, his life is cut short and all his best laid plans are for not. The point of the parable is not that God is out to get us, or that it’s bad to plan ahead. The gospel writer interprets the story before even telling it: Jesus says: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Instead, we are encouraged to place our trust in God who is more lasting, more enduring, more valuable than anything we can create of our own accord. Yet this is not a simple matter. It means moving beyond concrete things. It means giving up control of our desire to have things our own way. It means trusting God whose ways may not be defensible by any scientific proof, philosophical reasoning, economic analysis, or political strategy. It means instead embracing the mystery of God. This is the same truth that Koheleth discovers: at the juncture between despair and hope, Koheleth opts for hope. That hope is in the mystery of God. What looks like vanity and meaninglessness from one perspective, is mystery from the perspective of faith.

Our faith embraces the mystery of God. One of the ways we do that is in our celebration of the sacraments. What we do here this morning in our service of Communion not only commemorates the life and teachings of Christ, but celebrates the mystery of God. We proclaim

the mystery of our faith: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.” We may not be able to explain it; to some it may look like chasing after the wind, but through the eyes of faith, we are able to see that we are part of something more.

Sometimes the most we experience of God may be the clack-clack of apple tree branches, a piece of bread broken and shared, a question that we dare to ask, a pause in the rush when stop to wonder. But that just might be enough for us to get the idea that we are not in this alone. We are part of something more, something that embraces the branches and the bread, the questions and the wonder, something that includes the blowing in the wind, the breath of the Spirit of God, the mystery at the approach of the approach of splendor. Amen.