

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 27, 2024

The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz

on

Ecclesiastes 11 and 12; 2 Timothy 2:1-7

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A Whiff of Vapor

“‘Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!’ These words from Ecclesiastes are like a chime that sounds again and again throughout the text, calling us to pause and consider. This ancient phrase, sometimes translated as ‘meaningless’ or ‘pointless,’ captures a lament not only about human pursuits but also about the deep mystery at the heart of our lives. This refrain appears dozens times in Ecclesiastes, or “Kohélet” in Hebrew, and its true meaning unfolds as we encounter the word “*hevel*” (הֶבֶל). Far from superficial vanity as we might think of it—of preening or empty pride—the word carries us into the depths of human frailty and the evanescent quality of life.

Hevel is a difficult word to pin down in English. It literally means ‘breath’ or ‘vapor,’ conjuring something insubstantial, passing, elusive. A closer look might suggest that *hevel* is a way of describing the ‘untouchable mystery’ woven into human life, that sense of incompleteness and yearning that our best efforts never quite satisfy. Kohélet’s use of this word speaks to the human experience of reaching for something lasting, only to find that our labors and loves slip like smoke through our fingers. Rather than a call to despair, though, this sense of *hevel* invites us to wonder: what lies beyond our striving? What sustains us in the spaces we cannot fill?

This sense of *hevel* does not imply that our lives lack value. Instead, it points us to a fundamental truth about our own limits. The writer of Ecclesiastes knows well the fleeting beauty of human work and the ultimate futility of living only for things that perish. As he laments, “I hated life; because the work done under the sun is grievous to me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

Here, ‘vanity’ is closer to ‘futility,’ the sense that even our most dedicated work cannot escape the grip of time and decay. Yet the tone is not hopeless, for *hevel* also hints at a paradox: that in our fragility, we are held by a strength that is not our own.

This invitation to humility is one that brings us face-to-face with our reliance on God. If *hevel* calls us to anything, it is to a deeper surrender, an openness to the reality that we do not hold life’s mysteries in our hands. Ecclesiastes offers us a perspective that seems to embrace life’s limits while beckoning us toward an encounter with the Eternal Creator. As finite creatures, we are given the chance to live in the light of God, finding that our brief and often messy existence still has a place in His plan.

This mystery of God's infinite care is perhaps best captured at the conclusion of Ecclesiastes, in Chapter 12, where the writer exhorts us to "remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth" (12:1). These words are not merely a call to worship but an invitation to root ourselves in a reality greater than the passing ambitions of youth. They urge us to draw near to God while our strength allows us to seek Him wholeheartedly, to orient our lives around His presence. The author uses poetic images of aging—a trembling house, dimming sight, weakening limbs—to reveal the slow dissolution of human vigor and the inevitability of our return to dust. Through these words, we see a life lived in awareness of God as a life lived with purpose and integrity, regardless of its brevity.

Ecclesiastes invites us to reframe our ambitions and anxieties in light of *hevel* and to acknowledge the holy fear of God. But this 'fear' is not dread; rather, it is reverence, a deep awe that holds space for God's mystery.

To fear God is to make peace with our limited understanding, to accept our lives as they are without needing to control them. This reverence is a kind of yielding, a surrender to God's wisdom over our own. Here, in the humility of acknowledging our own finiteness, we discover freedom—a release from the relentless pressure to grasp, acquire, and cling to what we cannot keep. In this freedom, our restless hearts find rest.

What does it mean to live in the light of *hevel* today? We may feel this transience in the passage of time, in the way friendships or careers shift and fade, or in the moments of profound beauty that come and go. We experience it in the way we age, the way loved ones drift in and out of our lives, or in the deep sense of impermanence we feel when something we cherish is lost. Each of these moments of *hevel* invites us to lift our gaze and wonder what it might mean to entrust even these ephemeral things to God.

The writer's final call is to "fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13), words that ground us in what matters. This ancient text doesn't leave us with philosophical abstraction but with a practical invitation: to live each day in reverence and obedience, aware of our relationship with the Divine. When we do this, we find that our lives, though fleeting, become vessels of God's love. Even our smallest actions—an encouraging word, a moment of kindness, an act of humility—carry an eternal weight because they partake in God's own nature.

As we ponder *hevel*, we come face to face with a liberating truth: we don't have to 'make a world of difference' or 'make a mark' on this world to live a life that matters. In God's presence, we are remembered and cherished.

Each breath, each fleeting moment, is imbued with significance beyond our understanding. God alone grants our days a value that surpasses the limits of time and space. As we entrust our fragile lives to Him, we find ourselves drawn into a love that never fades, never fails, and never forgets.

May we rest in the freedom of this divine love, accepting our limits and rejoicing in God's boundless care. Even as we are like *hevel*, God's eternal breath sustains us. And though our days are like a mere whiff, our lives find true meaning in God, who remembers, redeems, and holds us forever."