

For the World: Meaning

During the summer of 1888, Vincent Van Gogh was struggling to discern the significance of his life and his work. He took some solace in the fact that artists participate in a long tradition. The Romantics prepared the way for the impressionists but you can hear this struggle in the letters that he wrote to his brother, Theo. He says for example, "Painters to take them alone, dead and buried, speak the next generation or to several succeeding generations through their work." And yet, he seemed to have this nagging sense that that wasn't quite enough. He couldn't shake this longing for something more than merely inspiring future artists. Later that same summer he says again to his brother Theo, "Yes, artists perpetuate themselves by handing on the torch. Delacroix to the Impressionist etc...but is that all?" Van Gogh's search for meaning would intensify during that oncoming fall and on through the rest of his very short life which ended in 1890. It seems that we human beings can't truly thrive or flourish without a sense that our life means something. That was something that Van Gogh grappled with at the end of the 19th century. It's something that many of us grapple with at the beginning of the 21st century and the question is, why? Last week we began a new sermon series and in it we are seeking to understand and explain the unique features of the late modern world in which we live. Specifically, what is it that Christianity has to offer such a world. A central tenant of the Christian faith is that God so loved the world that he gave his only son and he calls his followers likewise to expend themselves for the world. If Christianity is for the world, what does Christianity have to offer the world that in many ways seems to be not all that interested in what Christianity has to say? Despite those doubts, I believe Christianity still speaks to us in our modern context. In the next several weeks we'll be looking at some of the things Christianity might have to offer. Last week we began with the theme of transcendence and the sermon served as a bit of an introduction to the series as a whole . So if you missed it, I'd encourage you to go back and listen to it online because it sets the stage for everything I want to say in the coming weeks. We began with transcendence so I thought today we'd go a little bit easier, we'd choose a smaller, more insignificant topic like the meaning of life. Tonight we'll try to figure out what is the meaning of life. The fact that we joke about that and people even joke about the question "What is the meaning of life?" in philosophy departments shows us how far we've come as a society because to the ancients, this was the essential question. Why are we here, what is our purpose, what is the meaning of our existence? My sense is that all of us, whether we consider ourselves Christians or skeptics, grapple with this issue, this trouble to find the meaning in our lives. Specifically what I'd like us to do tonight, is to consider the emptying of meaning in our modern context and the filling of meaning. This means that the first half of the sermon is a little bit depressing; but hopefully you'll feel a little more lifted up during the second half of the sermon. So, we begin with the emptying of meaning. Our passage tonight is taken from the opening prologue to the book of Ecclesiastes. If you didn't know any better, you would probably think it's very possible that Ecclesiastes could have been written during the modern era because of the radical skepticism that it expresses. The book of Ecclesiastes would fall in the category of what's called "Ancient Pessimism" literature. In this prologue we're introduced to the primary speaker who is quoted throughout most of the book. This person is unnamed, he is simply called The Preacher. Sometimes that is translated as the "assembler" because what he literally does is assemble these various wisdom sayings in order to teach people how to live a meaningful, productive live. This preacher, teacher, assembler of wisdom, is quoted throughout the book and he lists all the things in life that amount to nothing more than a striving after, or a chasing after the wind. The repeated refrain that we see throughout the whole book is what we see in that very first verse in our passage. "Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity." which is also translated, "meaningless". Everything is meaningless. In this brief passage, the preacher laments the futility of life in this world. We see a couple representative examples in these few verses. In verse 3 he says, nothing is gained by all the toil at which we work. In verse 4 he says the succession of generations doesn't change the basic situation in which we find ourselves. A generation goes, a generation comes but the earth is the same. In verse 7 he says nature doesn't make any progress either. All the streams run into the sea and yet the sea is never full. Or verse 9, the circumstances of human life repeat themselves. What has been is what will be. And then verse 11, people don't even seem to be able to learn from the past. There's no remembrance of former

things. This preacher, this assembler of wisdom, presents us with a rather bleak picture of life that is devoid of all meaning and purpose. In some ways, our situation has gotten even worse because the modern world seems to empty life of its meaning. Let me describe what I mean by that by drawing on the work of a man named Luc Ferry who is a French philosopher, a secular atheist, a secular humanist, who wrote a book called *Man Made God: The Meaning of Life*. I have tremendous respect for Ferry. He's a great author and he has written many helpful books. What I most appreciate about him is that as an atheist he doesn't dodge the tough questions that he has to face as an atheist in the same way I hope that I don't dodge the tough questions that I have to face as a Christian believer. In this particular book, he addresses the very concern that Van Gogh raised. He tells us that Enlightenment thinkers in the past encouraged people by saying, yes, it is true, the individual human being, the individual person, you yourself, will die, but the human species will go on. So what gives meaning to your seemingly insignificant life, is that you play your part. As long as you make your contribution to the edifice of civilization, then that is what gives your life meaning. But Luke Ferry faces up to the fact that that comes as small comfort and it might even come as a pathetic joke to that individual who, at some point in the future, will disappear from the face of the planet. What good is it to have contributed to the edifice of human civilization if you as an individual aren't around to enjoy it. And so the problem has become even more acute in our time and place because people in the modern west have given up belief in God. Not only that, they've also given up on those Utopian dreams of the past like Marxism, which is nothing more than a this-worldly religion. Ferry points out that with the collapse of belief in God, the collapse of these utopian dreams, nothing has come in to take their place. How do we now, in the 21st century, try to find meaning and significance in our lives? What Ferry suggests is essentially what we all ought to do is throw ourselves into projects. This is especially true in New York. New Yorkers especially love projects so we throw ourselves into all these various life projects. They all serve some purpose, some kind of point or else we wouldn't engage in them in the first place. But if we ever dared to stop and think and ask "Why are we doing all the things we're doing and what difference does it really all make? The meaning of all the little meanings of our activities seems to escape us. When we ask why are we doing the things that we're doing, we're stumped, we don't have an adequate answer. Ferry says this, "In everyday life, we are no doubt aware that at every moment of what we have to do to carry out this or that, "useful task". But once we begin to think about it, the utility of this utility remains opaque or doubtful. The meaning of meaning. The ultimate significance of all these particular meanings is lacking. Most often this impression is fleeting and we have only to go back to our activities to get rid of it. Whether it's raising kids, honing our craft, making a little bit more money, climbing up the social ladder. He goes on to say this, the modern citizen is frustrated. He has the feeling that he's not on earth only to purchase automobiles or ever-better stereo systems. Money, fame, power, seduction of course do seem like values to him but relative ones, he would happily exchange them for something more profound. It is not that the former are to be condemned, but they don't seem able to constitute an ultimate end. The meaning of meaning escapes us. The question is, "what do we do when we realize that meaning in the modern world is somewhat fragile. All these various projects in which we throw ourselves in can't seem to ultimately satisfy this desire for meaning. Many people would say that the loss of some kind of transcendent meaning is actually a great thing. Rather than causing despair when we realize that the only meaning that is available to us is the meaning that we construct for ourselves. Some would see this as an exhilarating moment because it is the indication that we've achieved ultimate freedom. Now Anthony Laden who is the chair of the Philosophy department at the University of Illinois at Chicago is one such person who finds the lack of meaning in the world in which we live, an exhilarating thing. He says this, "In the absence of God, all there is left to human life is human action and interaction with ourselves and each other and other aspects of the natural world. And the only meaning any of it has is the meaning we manage to give it. Our existence is thus one long walk on a tightrope over a yawning abyss and there is nothing to catch us should we fall into meaningless, isolation, or even mere ordinariness. but that is exactly what I find so exhilarating about being an Atheist. Life is up to us, there are no safety nets. That's a bracing thought, that's also a reason to live." Laden acknowledges that in this world where we have abandoned belief in God, our existence is nothing

more than a long walk on a tightrope over a yawning abyss and there is absolutely no meaning to it whatsoever. He finds that exhilarating. He says we construct the meaning of our lives. But to me it seems like little more than a game of pretend. It reminds me a little bit of people who struggle with being on time so they deliberately set their watch fast by five minutes. I actually tried doing this in the past. I'd set my watch fast by five minutes thinking that could help me get on time to wherever I needed to go but it didn't work because I knew even if the watch said 5:50pm, I knew it was really 5:45pm. I knew I was lying to myself. And here's the point, we can't just imagine that there's meaning and live as if there it. Either there is, or there isn't. It's not exhilarating if there's no meaning to our existence. It is depressing. And that is what the author of Ecclesiastes is trying to tell us. Here is one of the things we need to face: If meaning is not an exhilaration, then it should cause us to stop and reflect on our lives and whether or not we can find a secular basis for meaning. The Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf is very pessimistic about that. He doesn't think that a secular foundation for meaning can be found. The only viable candidates are religiously based. And that's why we should pay attention to the philosopher, Charles Taylor, who makes an incredibly important point in his book, *A Secular Age*. He says that we can't talk about meaning in the abstract. Even now you're probably starting to have your eyes glaze over. It's not something that's floating, free-form out in the air and all we have to do is grab it. No, meaning comes from Someone, it comes from something. That's why Taylor says, "People would be willing to die for God or they'd be willing to die for the revolution, or they'd be willing to die for the classless society, but who is going to die for meaning?" There's nobody out there who says, "I am going to die for meaning. It has no content, no substance, it doesn't come from anywhere. I'm just imagining that it exists and I'm willing to give my life for it." The very problem that we face here would have been a complete mystery to people 500 years ago. In our age we understand this complaint: the disenchanted world is devoid of meaning. We understand when people tell us that they're trying to find some discernible purpose in their lives. We understand that struggle. But if you tried to explain that to someone 500 years ago, they would have looked at you with the most puzzled look. If anything, 500 years ago, people experienced an excessive abundance of meaning. Every little thing they did meant far too much. And yet, everything we do seems so insignificant. The modern world has really emptied life of meaning and once we realize that, where might we turn to see meaning filled in our lives? This was a question that was deeply personal to Leo Tolstoy so perhaps, he might be of some help to us. Between the years of 1879-1880, Leo Tolstoy wrote a little essay called, *A Confession*, which is essentially a spiritual autobiography. He begins by simply telling his own story. He talks about how he was baptized and raised in the Russian Orthodox church. By the time he reached age 16 he stopped going to church, he stopped praying and his main mission in life was to be better than everybody else. He said he wanted to be more powerful, more important, more influential, more famous. And the way in which he was going to achieve that was through his art: becoming a writer. He reflects on his youth with some regret. He acknowledges that he was guilty of all kinds of vices: lying, stealing, cheating, promiscuity of various kinds, even violence. He confesses that there was no crime that he didn't commit. His life took a turn for the better when he got married. And the new circumstances of the happy family life, diverted him for a moment from that search for meaning in his life. As time went on, he found that he would experience these bouts of bewilderment and confusion. He would feel lost. Sometimes those moments would pass but then would recur and he found himself asking why. "Why am I doing all the things that I'm doing? What's the meaning of it all?" And so he writes this in the confession: "Beginning to reflect on the education of my children, I would ask myself 'Why?' Or deliberating on how the peasants might achieve prosperity, I would suddenly ask myself, 'What concern of it is mine?' Or thinking about the fame of my own writing, I would say to myself, 'Well fine, so you'd be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, or Moliere, more famous than all the writers in the world and so what?' And I had absolutely no answer." Tolstoy retells a story. A story of an old eastern fable about a traveler who comes across a wild beast. He takes him by surprise and to escape this beast, the traveler hides in a well. He jumps into the well but as soon as he takes shelter in this well he looks below him and realizes that there's a dragon at the bottom of the well with its jaws open, ready to devour him. The traveler's in a tough spot. If he leaves he'll be eaten by the beast, if he drops to the bottom of the well he'll be devoured by the

dragon. So he tries to stay where he is. He notices there's a branch from a bush growing out of the crevice of the well and so he clings to this for dear life. While he does so, he notices there are two mice, one is white, one is black and they are both gnawing on the branch that he is hanging from. He knows it's only a matter of time before they gnaw all the way through the branch and he will fall to his certain death. But in the meantime, while he is awaiting his end, he notices that on one of the leaves of the branch there are a couple drops of honey. He sticks out his tongue and he licks those drops of honey for one moment of sweetness, one moment of satisfaction, until his life comes to an end. Tolstoy likens this traveler to himself. To his own existence and to all of us. This is what he says, "In the same way, I am clinging to the tree of life, knowing full well that the dragon of death inevitably awaits me, ready to tear me into pieces, and I cannot understand how I have fallen into this torment. I try licking the honey that once consoled me but it no longer gives me pleasure. Those two drops of honey, which more than all else, had diverted my eyes from the cruel truth, my love for my family and for my writing, which I called art, I no longer found sweet. The white mouse and the black mouse represented day and night and they are gnawing at the branch from which I am hanging and this is no fable but the truth. The truth that is irrefutable and intelligible to everyone." Like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, Tolstoy is preoccupied with death. That's why he asks, is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of the death that awaits me?" To find an answer of that question, Tolstoy searches all the branches of knowledge, he searches all the branches of science. He even tries to find new ways to divert himself from the very question. He explores four methods of escape, but in the end, they all ultimately fail. And so he comes to the conclusion of the preacher of Ecclesiastes, all is vanity. Everything is meaningless, until he finds what he's searching for. He doesn't find it among the sophisticated members of the ruling class of which he was a part. He finds it among the poor, peasant farmers in Russia and their faith in Jesus Christ. And what he discovers is that living among them, observing them, inevitably led him to acknowledge that there does exist another kind of knowledge, which is faith. And that only in faith can we find the meaning and the possibility of life. The book of Ecclesiastes reaches the exact same conclusion. You wouldn't think it at first because it seems life Ecclesiastes fully endorses this radical skepticism but in fact its not as bleak as it appears. If we pay attention to the book, we realize there are in fact two voices that we hear in the book of Ecclesiastes. The first is the voice of the preacher, the assembler of wisdom, the teacher of wisdom. But there is a second voice. It is the voice of the author, the narrator, who introduces the preacher in verse 1 and who also returns in the very end of the book (in the epilogue) in order to provide his assessment of the preacher's teaching. The preacher was famous for saying "vanity of vanities, all is vanity". But there is one other phrase that he repeats over and over again. It's the phrase, "under the sun". "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun." It's a key phrase because when he speaks of life "under the sun", he's imagining a world without God. A world cut off from heaven above. This is a world without God. This is life under the sun. Of course, from that particular point of view, life is meaningless if there is no god. In the final verse of the book of Ecclesiastes, we see that the second voice, the author concludes that yes, this preacher of wisdom did a good job trying to collect these various wisdom sayings, weighing them, studying them, arranging them, but ultimately the author of Ecclesiastes concludes that the preacher fails. The preacher fails to teach wisdom. He fails to communicate to us how we should go about living our lives because the perspective he puts forward is a world without God and therefore, it will end in meaninglessness. But, only faith in God can resolve this search for meaning. The author of Ecclesiastes, says when everything has been said and done, all the arguments made, here is the conclusion of the matter. What is the meaning of our existence, why are we here, what is our purpose? Fear God and keep his commands. And you know what's interesting is this is essentially the same way that the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it. The first question in the Catechism essentially is What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of our existence. What is the chief end of man? The answer is, to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Fear God and keep his commands. It's only faith in God and the resolve to live our life for him that gives meaning to our existence. That may not sound all that convincing, so why is that the case? Let me see, as we press towards the close, if I can put it like this. The New Testament nowhere quotes the book of Ecclesiastes, although

it does allude to it in Romans, chapter 8. And there in Romans 8, the apostle Paul is laying out the cosmic scope of the gospel. What Paul says in verses 20-21 is that the very created order was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage of corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. That word Paul uses, futility, frustration, its the same word in Greek that we seen Ecclesiastes, its this word that means vanity and meaninglessness. What Paul is telling us is that Jesus has come into this world not only to rescue individuals but actually to redeem the whole created order from its bondage to meaninglessness and absurdity. And how has Jesus done this? Jesus doesn't remain at a distance. He actually enters into life under the sun. He enters into this world that has been cut off from God. he enters into the meaninglessness of our existence and endures even the absurdity of the cross. He experiences the ultimate annihilation. He's living in that world under the sun, not just figuratively but literally because literally Jesus is forsaken by God. He cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He enters into the meaninglessness of our life. But he does so in order to completely undo it. By rising again from the grave, he conquers death. Therefore, Jesus is uniquely in a place to restore meaning to all those aspects of our life that are threatened by annihilation because of the inevitability of death. Only Jesus is now in a place where he can give meaning to our wisdom, to our work, to our loves and to our very life. I've only got time for one final example. Let me try to show you how this actually works. Let's consider the example of work. Let's go back to the very struggle that Van Gogh kicked us off with. What gives meaning to our work? We could say that work serves a purpose because it enables us to pay the bills and put food on the table. That's true and that's good, but if the only purpose of our work is to benefit the self, it very quickly becomes empty and dreary. We could say a broader, more important purpose behind our work is to in some way use our work to contribute to the well being of our community. That of course is also a very good thing. It adds much greater, richer texture to the work we do. But if all that our work accomplishes is seeking the well being of the self and our community, even that is not enough. This was the very struggle that Van Gogh had. It wasn't enough to inspire future generations of artists. Is that all? It doesn't ultimately satisfy. Miroslav Volf says if the only purpose of our work is to benefit the self and others, in a sense it seems like it's building sand castles on the seashore. If that's all there is to it, then time is eventually going to wipe everything away and the only meaning our work produces is that which is limited to the time where the activity is taking place or the results last. So if there's no more value to work than benefiting the self or the community then we're in deep trouble. What Jesus shows us is that our work can find ultimate meaning only when in and through our work for itself or for others we also work God. We cooperate with God in our work because by doing so we're not only fulfilling his commands, we're actually achieving his purposes in the world. What God promises us is that everything we do in service to him will not ultimately be destroyed. It will not ultimately be annihilated by death because God has promised that he will preserve everything that is good, true, and beautiful about the work that we do in service to him. The promise of the gospel is not just that he is going to rescue us as individuals but that somehow, some way, even our work, the very things we pursue in this life vocationally, will find their way eventually into the new world which God has promised. It's almost too wonderful to imagine but the book of Revelation says that our works will follow us into the new heavens and the new earth. How will that be, I don't know. Maybe it's that our works somehow are preserved in the memory of God or maybe somehow God weaves it all together to lay the building blocks for this new future. What we're being told here is that if Jesus is risen from the grave and if Jesus is now reigning over all things, and if Jesus is going to make all things new, then everything we do now, matters. Nothing will ever be lost. Nothing will ever be wasted. Yes, everything that we have ever done in service to Jesus is going to have to be purified and redeemed but it will find it's place in the city that he has promised. So that means that everything means something. Therefore, as we come to this table, we come in anticipation of that day when Jesus will in fact make all things new. We also come to this table affirming the truth that this is the place where meaning can be found. Let's pray. Father God, we acknowledge that the world in which we live is complicated. It seems to empty our existence of meaning. It can leave us feeling like we're afloat, adrift, confused, bewildered about whether anything we do really matters and whether any of it will really last.

Everything seems so vain and meaningless. But Father, we pray that you would help us to tend to the words of Ecclesiastes that show us that this world is meaningless only if we live life under the sun, cut off from you, devoid of a sense of your reality. We pray that you would help us to see that Jesus has come into this world, into the very meaninglessness of our existence in order to free us from it. Help us to see that he was cut off and that he endured the curse of sin so that we might be redeemed from that curse of being cut off from you and therefore, we have the promise that everything in this life matters. Help us to find in you the meaning that we so desperately crave and help us to live our lives out of that. We ask in Jesus name and for his sake, Amen.