

To KNOW Christ and one another more deeply,
To CARE for one another in truth and in love,
To GROW as followers of Jesus.
- CG Mission Statement

Worship: Isaiah 30:15

(Here is a psalm/song to help your group as you worship.)

Read Isaiah 30:15 using the prayer practice of Lectio Divina. Read the passage aloud 3 times but read from a different translation for each reading of it. After each reading, spend a few minutes reflecting. After the first reading, open yourself to the presence of God. On the second reading, listen for a certain word or phrase that stands out to you. On the third reading, listen to what God's invitation might be for you.

Icebreaker

What would you consider one of your great accomplishments...which didn't bring the joy you expected?

Text for Discussion: Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

Turn in your Bibles and read this passage aloud together.

Aid for Discussion: Sermon Summary

What do we gain for all our work? Our hustling? Our striving to find fulfillment? This is the question Ecclesiastes asks and is uniquely fit to address. And it's a message we need to hear. For many, the promise of the American Dream has lost its credibility; the idea that good, hard work will result in prosperity and success no longer holds weight. Too often, the fruit of our labors is merely a painful awareness that we are not in control. Life is not fair. Worse, it's often farcical or even absurd.

Ecclesiastes' writer knows the truth in this. All we seek to bring us joy, contentment, and meaning – all of it – he has achieved yet deemed meaningless. All he ever found upon reaching the mountaintop... was wind. Of course, we object to this gloomy message. What about work? Education? Wisdom? Pleasure? Is there really nothing to be gained from a life spent pursuing these? But the writer has already been down these roads:

- “With much wisdom comes much sorrow” (Ecc 1:18).
- “What do I think of a pleasure-filled life? There was nothing to it, nothing but smoke” (Ecc 2:1-2).
- “When I took a good look at all I had done – all the sweat and hard work – I saw nothing but smoke and striving after the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing” (Ecc 2:11).
- “How the wise dies just like the fool!” (Ecc 2:16).

Reaching the peak of the mountain, only to find there's nothing there – it can crush us. We can toil and strive and hustle, but joy and contentment will elude us because they cannot be found through our personal salvation quests. “The complete joys of this world will never satisfy the heart.”

But Ecclesiastes isn't trying to depress us; it's trying to wake us up and set us free. The writer does this by offering a realistic, clear-eyed view of our lives. Until now, our focus has been on the self. Personal gain. Personal fulfillment. Personal pleasure. But here, God comes into the picture. Only God makes enjoyment and true contentment possible, for it is His gift alone to give. What we most need, we cannot earn. Despite all our efforts, we must let it sink in that the only path to fulfillment is to accept it as a gift from God. We please Our Father by learning to receive. All sin can therefore be seen as a rejection of God's undeserved, grace-filled gifts.

We all struggle with this – such an admission requires us to be overpowered, vulnerable, to see ourselves as inadequate. We must learn to live in awareness of God's presence and in awe of His transcendent holiness. This “Fear of God” sets us free from anxiety about our future, from guilt about our past, and from boredom in

our present. Because now is the only moment we have to trust and obey God (Isaiah 30:15). Our wisdom and strength therefore come from humbly resting in complete dependence on God. Contentment doesn't come from seeking one more treasure, but in knowing how treasured we are by the One who created us.

With this proper perspective, we realize our primary calling and responsibility is to receive God's grace. Once we root ourselves in the truth that we are forgiven and deeply loved by God in Jesus Christ, everything else we've ever pursued then falls into its proper place.

Guiding Question of the Week

(This question is intended as a target for the whole conversation. Do not ask for responses now. It will be repeated later in the study.)

How does our relationship with God transform depression and despair into joy and contentment?

Questions for Discussion

(Remember it is better to wrestle deeply with two good questions than gloss over many. Sub-bullets are intended for potential follow-up.)

- After reading Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26, what stood out to you?
 - Of all the pursuits that the author describes (wisdom, pleasure, work) which one do you most relate to?
- The Teacher of Ecclesiastes pours out the problem of the meaning of life in Chapter 1. What do you understand "all is vanity" and "striving after the wind" to be?
- In Chapter 2, we follow the Teacher's exploration of the meaning of life included a search for wisdom, projects to occupy himself, possessions to enjoy and personal greatness. What are his conclusions about each of these?
- What projects, possessions, or reputation have you pursued? What has been satisfying or unsatisfying about your pursuits?
- The Teacher steps back and lays out a different response to life's pursuits in 2:24-26 and brings God into the picture. What do you learn about this second response and how does it encourage you?
- Do you see your life as toiling or as a gift received from God? How does striving after what the world has to offer cause us to miss the joy God has to give?
- How does Isaiah 30:15 help us see that a proper relationship with God can transform depression and despair into joy and contentment?
- What do you need to be able to rest and receive simple gifts from the hand of God, rather than striving after the wind?

Experiment of the week

(A suggestion for engagement in following the way of Jesus this week)

Watch TV or listen to the radio for about 15 minutes. How does the same search for pleasure, possessions, or greatness manifest itself? Journal your thoughts to share with the group.