

The Next Thing Worth Having
Ecclesiastes 7:8-14; Luke 12:13-21
West Valley Presbyterian Church
January 15, 2023

1. We none of us know for sure what will happen to us. We don't know when fortune or misfortune will befall us.

A. The atmospheric rivers of the past couple of weeks have reminded us of that! [SLIDES 1 AND 2 IF AVAILABLE, IN LA AREA AND IN FELTON].

1. Most of us have been fortunate; the damage we've suffered has been things like tree branches down, and/or leaking roofs, and/or an inch of water in the garage.
2. When we see these photos, we are grateful that we weren't driving on the road that fell into a giant sinkhole. We are grateful that it wasn't our garage floor that was covered with six inches of mud.
3. And we also feel very sorry for those who were not so fortunate.

For the drivers who fell into the sinkhole.

For the people whose houses were flooded.

For the families of the 17 people who have died in the flooding (as of Wednesday morning).

For the mother whose 5 year old son was swept away as she was rescued by bystanders in San Luis Obispo County.

For all who have suffered part of the estimated \$1 billion dollars of losses per USA Today.

B. And in California, it seems like if it's not one thing, it's another. Right now it's catastrophic floods. But in summer it's huge wildfires. In Tuolumne County, where Rob and I lived, you could count on there being several huge wildfires in the area, every fire season; and of course you couldn't predict when or where they would happen.

C. And if it's not floods or fires, then it's traffic accidents or break-ins or a cancer diagnosis or SOMETHING. We'd like to think we can protect ourselves against trouble in the future. We do our best to predict where trouble might happen. We try to prevent what we think might happen. We buy insurance to cover financial loss if something does happen. And yet, stuff still happens. Well, guess what, the Bible knows all about that kind of uncertainty. Let's turn to our Scripture passages for today.

2. Ecclesiastes 7:8-14

SLIDE 3

"The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools." (7:8-9)

A. When we begin a project, we may feel like we know how it's going to work out. "Sure, I can do that, it'll be simple, I can do a great job." Sometimes that's true, and our pride is sometimes justified. But usually not. Things often don't go the way we planned; and then our pride just looks silly, and we get mad. And our anger just makes things worse. If we want to

actually complete our project, we are better off to be patient, and not brag, and not fly off the handle.

SLIDE 4

“Do not say, ‘Why were the old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions.” (7:10)

B. You may have seen those internet pictures of life in the 50s, when gas was 25 cents a gallon, and families all sat together in the living room to watch a black and white TV. When I see those, I confess that I get all nostalgic and start thinking about the Good Old Days. But realistically, the Good Old Days weren’t perfect either. For instance, if I had been an adult in the 50s, I would not have been able to be a chemist, or a pastor, either one. And if I’d been diagnosed with breast cancer in the 50s, I would probably have died of it. That’s why Ecclesiastes advises us that it’s not wise to ask such questions. It may be OK to visit the land of nostalgia; it’s not wise to dwell there.

SLIDE 5

“Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: Wisdom preserves those who have it.” (7:11-12)

C. Ecclesiastes agrees that having some money in your bank account is a good thing. Money can provide some protection, such as insurance, against illness or natural disaster. It can help you rebuild, and it can provide for your needs when you are no longer able to work. But given the choice between money and wisdom? We should pick wisdom. Why? Because wisdom leads us to make better choices in the first place. For example, which is better – to have the money to extend your life a year or so if you develop lung cancer, or, to have the wisdom to not smoke in the first place? Wisdom preserves those who have it. Not forever; but life is better with wisdom. Because wisdom is being rich towards God, and it is worth having.

SLIDE 6

“Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.” (7:13-14)

D. That is true. As much as we try, we don’t know for sure what’s going to happen in our futures. It’s true that weather predictions have gotten a lot better over the last five years, with the advent of computers large and fast enough to sort through all the massive amounts of weather data that we gather. I can go to websites that show me where the stormfront is and when it will reach me. And yet, even though I can know whether an atmospheric river is on the way, I can’t know things like whether our incense cedar is going to fall over and smash our brand new garage. I can’t know when and where a sinkhole is going to open up, so that I can avoid driving on that road. I can’t discover the particulars about my future.

E. So what do I do about that? Well, given that God has made all of time and holds all of time within his hands, and given that God is all wise and is the source of wisdom, then it makes sense to gain wisdom from God. It makes sense, as Jesus puts it, to be rich towards God.

F. And what happens if I don't? Well, Jesus tells us a story about that: the story of the rich fool.

3. Luke 12:13-21

SLIDE 7

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

SLIDE 8

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said to himself, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.

SLIDE 9

And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

SLIDE 10

This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

The rich farmer in Jesus' parable is not evil. His abundant harvest is due to his hard work and his good fortune with the weather. Jesus says nothing about him cheating workers, or stealing land, or refusing to pay his taxes or his tithe. He is not a bad man; he is fortunate. And, he is a fool. Why is he a fool? Two reasons: because he is focused only on himself; and, because he is counting on a future that he does not control.

A. When he's making his decisions, who does he talk with? Himself. And only himself. He doesn't talk with his family or his friends or his neighbors. He doesn't talk to God. Jesus says repeatedly, "He thought to himself" and "he said to himself", and "I'll say to myself." That's foolish right there. We learned last week that God intends for us to live in connection with one another, so that we can help one another out.

B. And, when he's foolishly planning his future all by himself, he forgets that he doesn't control the future. He's planning to take life easy, to rest up, to eat, drink and be merry.

He forgets that death comes for all of us, and we usually don't know either the day or the hour. He's like someone looking at his bank accounts and figuring that he has plenty of money saved for retirement, so he can cruise around the world if he wants to - forgetting that he doesn't control the stock market, the weather, or pirates, or death itself.

C. God says to the rich farmer, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared FOR YOURSELF?" Not only does God intend us to live in connection with one another, but God also intends for us to be rich in wisdom - ie, to be rich towards him. Being rich for oneself, in the end, will get us nowhere because death comes for us all. But being rich towards God will bless us not only in this life but also in the next.

4. So what should we do in order to be rich towards God?

A. Well, being mindful of God is a good start! Remembering that God exists, and that he is eternal, which we are not. Remembering that God created the whole universe, and we did not; that God controls the whole universe, and we do not. The rich farmer wasn't mindful of God; he never once thought about what God would want him to do with his abundant crop. Too often, we are not mindful of God either; we seldom think about what God wants us to do with what we have.

B. And once we are mindful of God, how do we know what he wants? We read his Word. I would have thought that was obvious; but, turns out, it's not. Christianity Today ran an article in the January issue about the percentage of Americans who read the Bible a minimum of 3 times in all of 2022. Want to guess what that percentage is? 39% of all Americans read a Bible passage 3 times per year or more. 61% of all Americans didn't read the Bible at all. Not in a book. Not on an app. Not on a Power Point slide or a church bulletin. And that's a big drop in just 1 year, from 50% in 2021 to 39% in 2022.

1. Quote: "Amid record inflation, threats of nuclear war in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and ongoing debates about the state of democracy, there were about 26 million Americans who stopped reading the Bible."

2. Sadly enough, that drop includes at least some people who consider themselves to be Christian. The number of people who identify as Christian has dropped also; but not as much as the number who don't read the Bible.

C. So, if you are reading the Bible, good for you! Keep it up, because that's how you know what God wants of you. That's how you become rich towards God. And if you are here in worship today, either in the sanctuary or on livestream, then good for you, because you are reading the Bible as part of worship. And if you'd like to read the Bible more often than once a week, then hooray! That's how you become richer in God than you already are. That's how you gain what's most worth having. If you want a specific suggestion of what to read, I suggest starting with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. Jesus' wise counsel in those chapters are a wonderful start to grow richer in God.

SLIDE 11

“Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?” (Eccl 7:13)

“Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.” (Eccl 7:9)

“Do not say, ‘Why were the old days better than these?’” (Eccl 7:10)

“When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other.” (Eccl 7:14)

We can't change what God has set. But we can gain wisdom wherever we are in life. We can let go of anger. We can look forward instead of back. We can hear from God by reading the Bible and learning what he is saying to us. And then we can grow richer in God. Even in the midst of uncertainties in life, we can look forward to the future and be happy. Growing richer in God is not only the next thing worth having. It's the only thing worth having. Amen.