



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, August 4, 2019

*The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 | Psalm 49:1-11 | Colossians 3:1-11 | Luke 12:13-21

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a time unlike any other in history. In just a couple of generations a dramatic economic shift had taken place that reshaped a national way of life. Except for a few farmers and herders, the countryside was largely abandoned. People moved to cities and towns looking for jobs that didn't exist for their grandparents. The once common barter system became a thing of the past. No more exchanging three chickens for a bolt of fabric. In its place, what had been a rarified way of transacting business, became the norm for everyone. Money was now what mattered. The economy became cash-based, and the social structures, value-driven. Average people, not just the elite, could earn money, spend it, save it and incur significant debt. They could take financial risks that might pay off, or just as easily crash.

There had been rich folks and poor folks all along. But now, for the masses of poor people, it was possible to more than merely dream of a different way of life. Some, though not many, could win in this new economy and move up the ladder. It wouldn't be easy, but with skill, hard work and a great deal of luck, you might rise above the status your grandparents took for granted as their lot in life. The personal wealth race was on, and a new national obsession was born. With that, little else mattered.

If this sounds familiar, it should. You probably studied this period of ancient Jewish history in your last years of Sunday School, when you were just getting old enough to learn that not all the stories in the Bible were happy ones, filled with angels and rainbows, and people eager to love God above all else.

You had always known there were some not so nice characters in the Bible. One of the first stories we all learned was about the baby Moses, and how his mother hid him in a basket floating in the Nile so the wicked Pharaoh wouldn't kill him along with all the other little Jewish boys whom he saw to be a threat to his throne. Later we heard about how, when grown up, Moses led his people to freedom in the Promised Land, where the Israelites formed a new nation. Eventually,

we learned that not everything went so well for Israel. They got mixed up in some bad business, lost everything and were carried off into exile.

Yet the Israelites were a people who were not easily defeated. With God's help they got back on their feet, returned to their homeland, and made a new life for themselves. Which is a long way of bringing us to what we heard today. The author of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher or Teacher, as he is called, is thought to have been writing sometime around 400 BC, during the Persian domination of Israel. Though they were ruled by a foreign power, the Israelites enjoyed a climate of previously unknown peace and prosperity. The new market economy was in full swing and times were financially good for a number of people. So, why all the doom and gloom? If things were O.K., why not enjoy the moment while it lasts and let tomorrow take care of itself.

Well, in fact, the ancient Teacher says that's all we can do – enjoy the moment; but don't worship it, or think it can be controlled. Each moment, especially the best, is unique, and ultimately ends. Israel had known good and bad times, and their situation often changed overnight. To have thought that their prosperity would last was indeed vanity and a chasing after wind. All prosperity comes at a price. The Teacher reminds us, you can't take it with you. So what are we going to do with what we have while we have it?

Since those words were penned much in the world has changed, but people haven't, at least not much. It doesn't take much for greed to make us selfish. Fear still breeds hatred. Pride still produces arrogance and stupidity. The unknown and unfamiliar still spawn prejudice. Ego still turns people into liars. All of this, too, is vanity.

Yet after this much time as a species taking up space on this planet you would think we would learn something; that we would get tired of this chasing after wind. We probably do. But what do we do about it? The cynics rationalize and give in to the status quo, we compromise with what we call 'the lesser of two evils,' and keep going. And the chase continues. Human striving and toil can be very addictive, and always for its own sake, obliterating everything of real value.

So, twenty-four hundred years after the Teacher penned his sermon to a stressed nation the one thing that all people still have had in common is time. Some get more of it than others, and fretting over that just becomes another chase after wind. But each of us has this moment that can be used or wasted, enjoyed or worried away. To what purpose shall we put this time we have been given? Our souls are what's at stake in this. It would be better that we examine our own, and make any adjustments we find we need to make, before God does a final examination.

In the end, what will our strivings say about us? Have we been chasing after wind, or seeking God? Have we lived for something good that will last, or was it all simply vanity?