

One of the most well-known and highly-respected figures in Portsmouth was the late pastor of New Hope Baptist Church, the Rev. Arthur Hilson. Art was a force to be reckoned with whenever there was injustice or some wrong that needed righting. But what he might have been most well-known for was his answer if you asked him how he was. Invariably he would say, “Too blessed to complain.”

One time I saw a church sign that was a variation on Art’s famous line: “Too Blessed to Be Depressed.” It’s a nice idea isn’t it? Think about being so blessed by God and knowing it, that you can’t possibly complain – you can’t imagine being depressed. That saying conjures up a wonderful image. Unfortunately, it’s not what we find in our scripture readings for this week. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we encounter a writer who is better described as blessed *and* depressed. The writer has everything he ever wanted and more and yet he complains *big time*.

We get just a glimpse of the Book of Ecclesiastes this morning, what one might call a brief autobiographical sketch of its author. But the book as a whole is not so very different from the piece of it we heard this morning. It has been described as cynical and pessimistic. You could go to church your whole life and never hear a sermon on this book. Yet, as I read the lessons this week, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking, “I need to preach on this.” So here I am.

I’m thinking this isn’t the most familiar book in the Bible, so let’s take a few moments to recall what’s in it. The writer of Ecclesiastes is never named, but called himself *Qoheleth*, which in Hebrew means, “the Teacher.” The Teacher starts off by saying that he was King of Israel in Jerusalem and later goes on to tell of his accomplishments saying, “I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.”

What did this wealthy man think of all he had done? He wrote, “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and what did I find? I found that all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

The word translated there and throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes as “vanity” is the Hebrew word *hevel*. (You have to use your Hanukkah “h” to say it right: “chhhevel.”) The plain-sense meaning of the word is a puff of wind, vapor, a breath. The Teacher uses *hevel* to describe how everything is fleeting, quickly passing away. The Teacher looks at all his accomplishments and says that they are but a puff of wind, a vapor, something that passes before it ever fully existed.

In a way, the word he uses stands in stark contrast with the other word for breath or wind used in the Bible, the Hebrew word, *ruach* (another word that uses that very gusty “h”). *Ruach* is the word used to describe the winds that blew over the waters at the beginning of creation. It is the word elsewhere translated as “spirit” and that forms the Hebrew basis for the Greek term we have come to know as “Holy Spirit.”

In any event, the Teacher describes himself saying, “I had everything a man could desire!” (2:8b NLT) and yet he says, “There was nothing worthwhile anywhere” (2:11b). Now...who is too blessed to complain?

Today, we live in times in which many people feel too ready to complain to imagine themselves being blessed. To some extent, it’s understandable. Not to wax too political here, but we have at the pinnacle of our national leadership one who imagines himself the *ruach* of the Nation, when in fact he is nothing more than a *hevel*. Be that as it may, we really have much to feel blessed about, even in these times when we can easily feel more depressed than blessed.

The fact is, it’s OK to find yourself blessed *and* depressed at times. That doesn’t make you any less a child of God, it just makes you all the more human. And being human is a key to understanding Ecclesiastes. You see, the Teacher never cheats. The Teacher has not been exposed, as best we can tell, to the idea there might be such a thing as life after death, so he doesn’t hold it out as an answer. Eternal life is never even referred to in Ecclesiastes. The Teacher is a this-worldly kind of guy who wants to understand the world we live in *now*. In understanding what a fleeting puff of wind human life is, the Teacher learns humility. Learning humility is no small trick for a great king who possesses land, property, and other wealth exceeding all who have come before him.

The Teacher sees how fleeting and meaningless all his possessions are and he is humbled. He sees something the *hevel* in charge of these times doesn’t see. Economic security is not unimportant – but it’s not what gives life meaning either. You see, through this book of questions, the Teacher hints at the answers. And they are not found in

goods, possessions, accomplishments. Woven into the very fabric of this book is the idea that *all* that we have is a gift from God to be enjoyed. The Teacher says that God gives wisdom, knowledge and joy (2:26 *NLT*). He tells us that God has made everything beautiful for its own time (3:11a *NLT*).

The great church reformer Martin Luther wrote of Ecclesiastes saying, “If someone compares the good things he has with the bad things he does not have, he will finally recognize what a treasure of good things he has.” In these times in which it is all too easy to complain, I think we need to take a clue from Luther – and from Art Hilson. Life is about more than that. We truly are “too blessed to complain.”