



June 10, 2012
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

It's Your Call: Chasing the Wind

Miscellaneous readings from Ecclesiastes 1-2

How many of you thought or spoken about last Sunday's service sometime over the week? Many of you shared that it was one of the most powerful worship experiences ever. Me, too! Of course, you helped make it so. Your energy, your excitement, your singing, your enthusiasm, your tears...it was incredible wasn't it? A highlight for me was when the kids came up to lay hands on the pastors for our installation. I felt like I was going to be crushed into the carpet! I was struggling to keep my elbows locked because I knew if they collapsed, I would have a colossal rug burn on my face!

On Monday I was still so excited, I went to Costco and didn't even eat samples. I just floated around the store, bumping into some of you. Encounters, emails, phone calls... they were all so encouraging. But of all the well-wishes I received, my favorite might have been this card from 7 year-old Ben Stephens and his brother Joe. It had a cross inside that they had made. And on the front of the card it said, "Be fearse Pastor. Thank you." Well, I don't know how "fearse" I am, but I know how grateful and excited I am for our future together.

Many of you asked about our "Free to Run" campaign, the one-time offering to eliminate our debt to the presbytery. Would you like to hear the results? So far we have received \$155,000. Isn't that magnificent? About 54% of our membership participated. Obviously that is nowhere close to the 100% participation goal that the Session set as our priority. Which means we will just have to work harder in the future to convince every single member that every single gift, even of \$5, counts when we are trying to stand together on something important! But to those of you who did participate—with gifts large and small—thank you! Money is still coming in, but to honor the spirit of this one-time offering we will not mention it again other than to inform you of our progress.

In last week's message I spoke from Hebrews 12 about running the race that has been marked out for us. We throw off all the weights that slow us down ...and we run! Eyes forward, set on the face of Jesus—no looking back, no living in the past—we run the course marked out for us. That is true for us as a church body. It is also true for us as individuals. Every single one of us has a course that God has marked out for us to run.

So here's our question for the morning and for the next few weeks: What are you running for? What is the purpose of your life! Let's just pause for a moment and think about that. What is the purpose of your life?

One of the two best books I read last year was this one: *The Call* by Os Guinness. Os is an author and speaker of international repute. Os Guinness is going to be our scholar-in-residence this summer. He will preach and teach several times. Os has written many books, but he describes *The Call* as the book that "burned most fiercely" within him. It deals with that ultimate question of life: "What am I doing here? What am I living for?" So we are going to kick off our summer looking at this wonderful truth: every single one of us has a calling from God.

Did you know that? Whoever you are, whatever you do, however smart or trained or experienced you are, do you realize that God has a call upon your life? When you do realize that—when you begin to live into it—you are going to discover a sense of meaning and purpose like you have never known before. That's what we are going to be about for the next few weeks and I would urge you to go home and order this book!

So if you wanted to find out about the meaning and purpose of life, where would you start? How about with someone who has it altogether? If you could listen to the reflections of the wisest, richest, most powerful and accomplished person to ever live; if you could hear what he thought was important in life, would that be worth doing?

Well...we can. King Solomon, David's son, was the wisest man that ever lived. One of the wealthiest, most powerful and most effective rulers of all time. If anyone knew how to make the most of life... and had the means to do so, this guy did. So I want you to listen to Solomon's reflections as he looks back as an old man upon the life he has lived. *[Pour water on dry ice]*

Ecclesiastes 1-2; selected readings:

1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

12I... was king over Israel... I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven... I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind...I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

1I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly...I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and

planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me...I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind...

17So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me...he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.... a chasing after the wind.

If that isn't a feel good passage of scripture, I don't know what is! I'll bet you are thinking, "I'm going home and memorizing Ecclesiastes as my power passage for the year!"

"Meaningless, meaningless!" cries Solomon. "Utterly meaningless." The English translation doesn't do it justice. Do you know what Solomon actually wrote in his native tongue? "Vapor...vapor...utterly vaporous!" He says, "Everything I chased after...everything that I thought would give me purpose and significance...turned out to be a vapor. Wealth? Vapor! Power? Vapor! Pleasure? Vapor! Wisdom...even wisdom? Vapor!" This makes his other phrase even more significant, don't you think? "Chasing after the wind!" Trying to find my purpose and significance by grasping for all of the things this world tells me matter most... is like chasing after the wind. You never catch it. And just when you think you have... poof, it's gone!

If ever there was a season when this message hits home, it is now. Following year after year of almost uninterrupted economic boom, boom, boom... four years ago, the house of cards fell. Person after person who thought they had their lives mapped out—their career, their financial future, their leisure, their children's future, their retirement—suddenly, all of it seemed like a vapor. Where did it go? Even in this last week, with some signs of recovery, I know folks who still feel like they are drowning... who are clawing their way to the surface, only to be hit by another wave of bad news. Economic struggles which lead to marital struggles

which lead to parenting struggles. Marriages are shaky because of the pressures. Relationships are shaky because people would rather hide their shame than tell the truth. It has been painful, hasn't it?

But I have also seen others respond differently. Instead of despairing of their marriage and abandoning ship, I have watched some couples cling to each other, almost reciting their vows daily...and come out with a stronger marriage than ever. I have watched as some move from career uncertainty to uncertainty, but do so with unflagging hope. I know a man who continued to tithe, even on his unemployment check, and did so with faith and joy.

What was the difference? Why is it that some people face calamity with hope and confidence, while others are leveled by it? Well, one thing might be this: the call of God. Those who believe that the purpose and significance of their life is something of their own creation, something they have dreamed up, something that is measured in deals closed and dollars banked and size of homes and newness of cars—they are the ones who ended up in a death spiral. But those who realized that their purpose in life was something outside of themselves—something greater than themselves—found a way not only to survive hard times, but to thrive in the midst of them.

If we think that the course of our lives—our future, our purpose—is something that we have to dream up, figure out and nail down, what happens when we reach the point that our best ideas don't work anymore? It is a terrifying thing when your future, your purpose, your significance...depends primarily upon you. When you falter or fail...and you will...what is your recourse? And even when you succeed...succeed fabulously, as Solomon did... you discover in the end, a sense of emptiness. A vapor. Is that all there is? It's like chasing after the wind. But if you were to discover that the God of the Universe has you in his mind, created you with a purpose, gifted you for the destiny to which you were called... wouldn't that be a gift? A gift of freedom? To know that it's not a matter of you figuring how where to go and what to do. Rather, it is a matter of you listening for the call of God and, when you hear it... following it!

Seniors, this is a big moment for you. As you graduate and head off to college or into the work force, you will hear the same advice echoing in your ears: "Go out and make something of yourself! Grab life by the throat! Make a difference!" These are great sentiments...but mostly stress-inducing. The best advice is this: know that God loves you, created you, gifted you, redeemed you and has called you for His purposes. The sooner you learn to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit... prompting, guiding, directing; the sooner you surrender your "right" to be the boss of your own life; the sooner you will discover that your richest, most productive, most purpose-filled life will be the one lived right at the center of God's call for you. And the sooner you will experience that sense of peace and purpose that nothing else can provide.

I am so grateful that Den Trittin will be speaking tonight to our kids and parents. No one I know has spent more time thinking about how young people can be launched into a life of purpose at the center of God's call than Den. Any parent who misses this... is missing the boat!

One day as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he called out two words to some fishermen who were going about their business. Do you remember? "Follow me!" Everyone who has ever given their life to Christ knew that he was offering himself as their savior. That's not a hard sell. But we often soft pedal the clarion call of these two words: Follow me! When we hear those words...spoken by the Lord who created us, gifted us, called us and saved us...when we hear those words spoken by the one who knows us better than anyone...and realize that God has use of us... there is no more amazing sense of joy and purpose in the world.

I mentioned this to an army friend this last week and he said, "You know, if you are in the infantry, there is a response to those words. When a commanding officer says, "Follow me!" the response is a thunderous, "Lead the way, Sir!" Over the next few weeks, we are going to explore the call of God: what it is, what it requires, how we discern it and how we follow it. God willing, in the end we will have many, many more in this church who recognize the call of Jesus, "Follow me!" and are ready to reply, "Lead the way, Sir!"

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. How does the world define "purpose?" in what ways have you bought into this definition? How does Solomon evaluate these standards of value?
 2. "Follow Me!" Os Guinness describes those and the two words that changed the world. What does it mean for you to follow Jesus? Get specific. Real life, real purpose, real legacy stuff.
 3. Are you going to buy "The Call?" If so, discuss how you might use that as a group during the summer.