

A Better Life: 1. Reframe
Ecclesiastes 2:4-12
November 5, 2017
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The inspiration for this series began a year ago when we introduced a Brand Promise meant to communicate to people not even thinking about a church what they might expect here. The first line of that promise: **At Messiah, we make life better.** A better life. Isn't that what we all want? We have hopes and dreams for ourselves, for our children and grandchildren. In the promo video to this message, we see pictures in frames, showing scenes of what life could be like. This morning, I want to talk about reframing what we hope for.

Every day, there are things we choose and things we don't have a choice about. I woke up this morning, and I was given a new day. I opened my eyes, and I was breathing, my heart still beating – and immediately, I had a choice. What kind of day is this going to be? I get to choose, and if I don't, the circumstances of the day take over. You've seen this (glass of water). Which is it? Half full or half empty. You choose. When I was a child, I remember my dad saying, "if you expect the worst, you'll never be disappointed." So I guess the glass is half empty and if it has a leak in it, it will be empty by the time I want a drink of water. But later on, I realized I could choose something more than that. This week, I began reading, *The Book of Joy*. In April 2015, Archbishop Desmond Tutu traveled to the home of the Dalai Lama for a five-day conversation about joy. In preparation for this conversation, people were asked to submit questions about joy and over a thousand questions were received. The most asked question was how to find joy in a world filled with so much suffering. Because it is easy to get weighed down with the present challenges, the unexpected life events, the constant noise of a world that seems broken, and the cost of everything we are trying to obtain.

They begin their book with these words: *No dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day and each moment, we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of human life on our planet. This is the power we wield.* If we want a better life, we have to be willing to reframe.

Our scripture is from the book of Ecclesiastes. Tradition suggests it was written by King Solomon, though it was probably written centuries after Solomon. However, Solomon's life was a metaphor for what a better life looks like. Solomon was the wealthiest of Israel's kings. He built the Temple in Jerusalem that his father David had planned. And then he spent twice as much time building his own palace. He had other houses throughout the kingdom, horses and chariots, and over 1000 wives and concubines. The Bible tells us God gave him the gift of wisdom. Where's the wisdom in that? But he thought that would bring him happiness. Solomon's appetite for more was insatiable. For twelve chapters, the writer talks about finding a better life – he's searching. Maybe it's here or here or here – and one of the places he tried to find life is also where many of us look, hoping more stuff will bring us happiness. More stuff is something we desire. It's like feeding an appetite. We are hungry. We eat and are satisfied but it doesn't last and we end up hungry again. And after seeking more stuff, the writer of Ecclesiastes ends up empty.

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 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 male and female singers, and a harem as well... I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before

me... (I didn't just make the Forbes list of the wealthiest people in the world. I was at the top. Everything about me says success.) **I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.** (if ever there was a better life, this has to be it. Just look at all he has become – picture of success!) **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; nothing was gained under the sun.**

Meaningless. Pointless. Like chasing the wind. Are we listening? What the writer realized was when he got what he wanted, it was not as satisfying as he thought it would be. Haven't you experienced that? You bought a new car, and you were so excited to have it. But before the new car smell wears off, you are already looking at the newer models. Or you bought the iPhone 8 and but now there's an iPhone X and it has facial recognition. I got to have one. Or you remodel the house and as soon as it is done, you start thinking of new changes you want to make. Having all these things is okay, but when the desire for these things is what's driving us, we will never be satisfied. Look at everything I have. I'm having trouble finding a place to store it all. So, why am I not happy. Why does it feel like I'm chasing the wind?

Reframe. It is a way of looking at what's before us and seeing it differently. Instead of wanting what we don't have, what if we start by wanting what we do have. How do you do that? Give thanks. It's not happiness that makes us grateful; it is gratefulness that makes us happy. When I was in my twenties, I lived on ramen noodles and macaroni and cheese – not because those were my favorite foods, because I could buy 5 for a dollar. For \$2, I had 10 meals. But before every meal, I would pause and give thanks for what I had, instead of what I wanted, and I was satisfied. I was grateful that I had something. Or in marriage what I've found is that the relationship does go so well when I focus on me. I've shared this before, but there was a time early in our marriage that I wasn't sure I wanted to be married anymore. It was hard. But one night on my way home, I felt this nudge – bless her – and I stopped and bought a card and flowers even though I didn't feel like – and every day, I began giving thanks. I got the focus off of me and gratitude changed my heart.

1 Thessalonians 5: **Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.** How is it possible to rejoice always? Paul tells us: pray continually. Connect with God and give thanks. That's joy. And this message came from a man named Paul who was writing from a prison cell while waiting for news of when he would be executed. So, you received a post it note. What is something in your life that you are grateful for? Before the service is over, would you write that on the post-it note and then post it on this wall as you leave the sanctuary. Years ago, someone brought me several boxes of thank you note and stamps and encouraged me to write one thank you note every day. And to end my day by writing a thank you note changed my perspective on the entire day. A better life comes when we reframe – look at what we already have and give thanks.

I believe God wants you to have a better life. It's what Jesus says in John 10:10 - **I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.** Or some translations say "abundant life." Jesus is saying that's why I came, but most people don't know where to go to find that. If the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying that stuff is meaningless – the toil and work that we do to acquire more is like chasing the wind, then where do we find what's meaningful? And at the very end of the book, he has the answer. **Worship God and keep God's commandments because this is what everyone must do.** (Ecclesiastes 12:13) In other words, we find a better life in relationship with God – worship and doing what God has asked us to do. Doing what God intend you to do. The reason you are alive. When we live into what God intends, life gets better. There

are several examples in this congregation of people who reached retirement and thought they would enter a non-stop vacation, only to realize after a few months that wasn't as fulfilling as they thought it would be. They needed a purpose.

Everyday, what's my purpose? How can I bless, how can I help make the world around me a better place? Last Sunday, we shared photos taken at the various projects in our Make a Difference Day. What I noticed were all of the smiles. I've discovered there is more joy in raking someone else's yard than there is in raking my own yard. It's a greater purpose. This week, I noticed a book that I'd not gotten around to reading. It's title *Unstoppable: the incredible power of faith in action*. It was written by a man named Nick Vujicic, and how he found fullness of life when he discovered God's purpose. He describes when he was ten years old he almost took his own life. The reason was that when he was ten, he was finally old enough to understand what it meant to be born without arms and legs. He realized he would never be able to feed himself or dress himself and probably never have a job. He would never have a girlfriend or get married or have children. Why should I go on living? But instead of taking his life, he began to trust there really was a God who knew his name. And when he trusted there was a God who knew his name, there must be a reason he didn't die in childbirth. There must be something God could do with him. It was that hope that kept him alive.

As he grew up, he kept thinking about what his purpose looked like. What might God's purpose for my life be like? What he discovered was also what the writer of Ecclesiastes discovered - first it's to glorify God and then to help other people. He found that people would listen to a kid who had no arms and legs – that he could speak to people who felt discouraged about their lives and everybody felt better when he told them that he found life by finding purpose. Today, he travels about the world as a motivational speaker and preacher. He has one foot with two toes, and he's learned how to do all kinds of things. He's married with two children.

He says, "Life came when I stopped focusing on my own challenges which made me feel worse, and instead I changed my focus to serving other people. That lifted my spirits. Everything you do to make someone else's life better makes your life meaningful." Gratitude and finding purpose. When we reframe, that's the way to a better life.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of November 5, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Dear Lord, everything I have comes from and belongs to you. I come to you filled with gratitude. I desire to serve you and to invest in your work. Guide me as I think through the details of how I live. Then, show me your ways that will bring about a better life for all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, November 6

Scripture: John 12:23-27, 18:33, 36-38

Jesus replied, "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified. I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever. Whoever serves me must follow me. Wherever I am, there my servant will also be. My Father will honor whoever serves me. "Now I am deeply troubled. What should I say? 'Father, save me from this time'? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time.

Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus replied, "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here." "So you are a king?" Pilate said. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice. "What is truth?" Pilate asked. After Pilate said this, he returned to the Jewish leaders and said, "I find no grounds for any charge against him."

Observation: Facing the cross, Jesus spoke about the guiding purpose that gave his life focus and clarity. He knew the reason he'd been born, and the reason for the choices he had made. So he and Pilate, the Roman procurator, were like two people talking past each other. Pilate was, literally, down-to-earth—"So you are a king?" he asked. But this earth didn't bind Jesus' thinking. "I am a king," he said, "but my kingdom is not of this world." For Pilate, that was baffling. He may have thought, "What other world than this is there?"

Application: Jesus lived for a reason: to bear witness to truth, and do whatever it took to save the world. That led him to the cross. But he also said, "Whoever serves me must follow me." What does it mean for you to "fall into the earth and die" in our time and place, where physical persecution and death aren't likely to be involved? How does this shape your daily approach to life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, empower me as I seek to live a life that draws on the same big reasons that you lived for. And guide me as I seek to think through the details of how I live for those reasons in my daily life. Amen.

Tuesday, November 7

Scripture: Matthew 5:3-12

"Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

"Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

"Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

"Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

"Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

"Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

"Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

"Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

"Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me.

Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you."

Observation: In his commentary, William Barclay noted that the verb translated "taught" in Matthew 5:2 meant, in the original Greek, "repeated and habitual action, and the translation should be: 'This is what he used to teach them.'" Jesus didn't just teach this once; he taught it regularly (and still does, thanks to Matthew's gospel). It quickly becomes clear that he had a startlingly different view of what a better life looks like.

Application: *The Message* paraphrases verse 8 as "You're blessed when you get your inside world— your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world." What are

some of the major influences that have helped to put your inside world right? In what ways do you “see” differently now than you used to?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, putting my inside world right isn't a one-time challenge. Help me keep listening to your voice above all the others that clamor for my allegiance, to keep treasuring the wonderful news you bring me. Amen.

Wednesday, November 8

Scripture: Genesis 15:1, 5-6, 13-15; Genesis 25:8

After these events, the LORD's word came to Abram in a vision, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great."

Then he brought Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them. He continued, "This is how many children you will have." Abram trusted the LORD, and the LORD recognized Abram's high moral character.

Then the LORD said to Abram, "Have no doubt that your descendants will live as immigrants in a land that isn't their own, where they will be oppressed slaves for four hundred years. But after I punish the nation they serve, they will leave it with great wealth. As for you, you will join your ancestors in peace and be buried after a good long life.

Abraham took his last breath and died after a good long life, a content old man, and he was placed with his ancestors.

Observation: We might be tempted to think, “Of course Abraham was content—everything in his life had worked out well.” Not actually—God promised him a land, but when he died he was still a nomad. God promised that he'd become a great nation, but when he died that hope rested in his one son Isaac (Hebrews 11:9-10, 13). Genesis 15:6 provided the key to Abraham's life—he “trusted the Lord.” And that was enough.

Application: What are some ways your life has been better because of choices your grandparents or other people who lived before you made (e.g. someone who set up a scholarship program that helped you)? Do you believe they could have felt a sense of contentment and satisfaction about those choices, even if they did not specifically get to see you benefit from them?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me how to view life through the lens of eternity, as you do. Help me to trust that there are vast spheres that lie way beyond my immediate ability to perceive. Amen.

Thursday, November 9

Scripture: Galatians 5:16-23

I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't

inherit God's kingdom. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this.

Observation: In Roman times (and today) some people think the outcomes and qualities Paul listed in Galatians 5:19-21 are part of a good life, either as “fun” or as side-effects of the pursuit of “fun.” But the apostle sketched a different vision, saying “you shouldn’t do whatever you want to do.” He vividly contrasted a Spirit-powered life with the negative outcomes produced when we live solely to satisfy our selfish desires, and left no doubt which life he believed is better.

Application: In *The Message*, verse 16 says “My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit.” Have you found freedom from some of the areas that result from doing whatever you want, from living as though you were your own God? Can you list areas where the Spirit has animated and motivated you to a better way of life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, through your Spirit continue to animate and motivate me to live beyond and above just my selfish desires. Guide me to that wonderful life against which there is no law. Amen.

Friday, November 10

Scripture: Acts 20:17-24

From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus calling for the church's elders to meet him. When they arrived, he said to them, “You know how I lived among you the whole time I was with you, beginning with the first day I arrived in the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears in the midst of trials that came upon me because of the Jews' schemes. You know I held back nothing that would be helpful so that I could proclaim to you and teach you both publicly and privately in your homes. You know I have testified to both Jews and Greeks that they must change their hearts and lives as they turn to God and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem. I don't know what will happen to me there. What I do know is that the Holy Spirit testifies to me from city to city that prisons and troubles await me. But nothing, not even my life, is more important than my completing my mission. This is nothing other than the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus: to testify about the good news of God's grace.

Observation: Does living a “good life” mean avoiding danger? Not always. Paul and his colleagues were travelling to Jerusalem to deliver an offering from the Gentile Christians of Greece to help their suffering companions in the faith there. He told the elders of the church in Ephesus that he was sure arrest and prison awaited him in Jerusalem. Yet he concluded his witness about how he lived with a sense of well-being and “success” by saying, “Nothing, not even my life, is more important than completing my mission.”

Application: Do you have a life mission? If you’re like many people, your first thought may be, “No—I really don’t.” But Paul’s words can help nearly all of us begin to locate that “mission” (even if we haven’t consciously chosen it). Of what would you say “Nothing is more important than _____”? As the answer to that comes into focus, prayerfully consider whether it fits God’s definition of a better life, or that of the society around us. Ask God to help you make any needed course corrections.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I do not want to miss out on the mission you call me to, the most important reason that you’ve given me life. Give me a clear sense of what that mission is, and the strength to live into it. Amen.

Saturday, November 11

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-9

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

Observation: Do you want a better life? From a Roman prison cell (Philippians 1:13-14), the apostle Paul bore radiant witness to the quality of life God offers us. As we hand over our anxieties to God in prayer, he said God's peace, purity and contentment flow in and through us, no matter what our situation. If we have any question about whether the apostle believed he had had a good life, we can read what he wrote to his young friend Timothy, again from a prison cell: "I have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. At last the champion's wreath that is awarded for righteousness is waiting for me" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Application: Paul connected our ability to live a better life, filled with God's peace and joy, with the mental "diet" we choose. Like a spiritual nutritionist, he advised, "If anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise" (verse 8). With reality TV, tabloids reporting who was seen with someone they weren't supposed to be with, negative political ads and celebrity tweets seemingly everywhere, does that strike you as naïve, idealistic and impossible to follow? Or might it hold a key to helping you live with more peace and a stronger connection with God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, remind me to bring my anxieties to you, not to my well-worn escape mechanisms. Focus my thoughts on all that is true, holy, just, pure, lovely and worthy of praise. Amen.