

Proper 13C – Christ is the answer to our despair

1. I want to take a moment as we begin to ponder some very sobering news, it's not new but it continues to pick up momentum
 - a. It's what life looks like when it's unhitched from the meaning and purpose that are found only in God's Word.
 - i. Over the past several decades our society has become progressively more secular
 - ii. A 2021 Op-Ed in The LA Times opined, **"The secularization of U.S. society — the waning of religious faith, practice and affiliation — is continuing at a dramatic and historically unprecedented pace. While many may consider such a development as cause for concern, such a worry is not warranted. This increasing godlessness in America is actually a good thing, to be welcomed and embraced."**ⁱ
 - b. But while the LA Times and others in the intelligentsia may welcome the increasing secularization of society with open arms, we see other troubling numbers rising at the same time.
 - i. Anne Case and Angus Deaton are two scholars at Princeton who set out to understand what accounted for falling U.S. life expectancies.
 - ii. They learned that the fastest rising death rates among Americans were from drug overdoses, suicide, and alcoholic liver disease – they coined these as "deaths of despair"
 - iii. In 2021 the CDC, **"reported more than 100,000 drug overdose deaths during the 12-month period ending in April 2021, a 28.5% increase over the prior year."**ⁱⁱ
 - iv. None of these papers will probably draw a line of causality between increased secularization and despair, but I think it warrants more than a casual glance
 - c. I want you to be equipped and prepared for what you face out in the world when you leave these doors, so that you can make sense of what you hear in the news
 - i. It's not 1965 or 1975, it's not even 2005 – the world has changed dramatically in recent years
 - ii. This is not the country or society that any of us grew up in
 - iii. Deaths of despair and so much of what we see crippling our society are merely symptoms of the root problem – the unhitching of society from God's Word.
 - iv. That Word has the antidote...it has the answers...Christ is the answer to our despair!
2. All of our readings today have something to say about this topic.

- a. First, we hear about one of the root causes of despair in our OT lesson from Ecclesiastes, written by King Solomon
 - i. The Teacher (Solomon) writes, **“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”** (Ecc 1:14)
 - ii. He means the endless cycle of everything that we see in life: wake up, go to work, come home, eat, repeat.
 - iii. Why do we do it? Usually money, it’s what you’ve got to do to live, but the cycle is maddening if the only meaning you have is the cycle itself.
 - iv. A little earlier Solomon says, **“All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been, is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”** (Ecc 1:8-9)
- b. This vanity is part of the fall into sin – work and life were meant to be a blessing.
 - i. That’s what we hear from God’s Word, **“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”** (Gen 2:15)
 - ii. We were made to work and work in paradise would have been a blessing.
 - iii. But when sin came through Adam and Eve’s disobedience work lost its purpose, warped by sin – cursed, **“And to Adam he said, ‘Because you...have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** (Gen 3:17-19)
 - iv. And so, life apart from God and His purpose became what Solomon observed thousands of years after Adam and Eve, “Vanity and striving after the wind,” because it’s an endless cycle until we die.
- c. In our Gospel our Lord warns about trying to fill life’s emptiness on our own when He says, **“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”** (Luk 12:15)
 - i. He then tells the parable of the rich man who built barns to house all of his possessions without a care for the afterlife or anyone but himself – his was an endless cycle of work to accumulate wealth (pretty American).
 - ii. Yet, at the peak of his career, as he’s living a life of ease, death comes when our Lord says, **“Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”** (Luk 12:20)
 - iii. The end-result of the vanity that Solomon talked about
 - iv. Jesus’ verdict contains the solution, **“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”** (Luk 12:21)

- d. We were made to honor God in how we live and what we do
 - i. Even clouded by sin humans are aware that there is something more as God tells us through Solomon, **“He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”** (Ecc 3:11)
 - ii. We are always seeking to fill that void but because of sin we don't naturally look for God.
 - iii. In the rich man's case, he found meaning in acquiring things...for others it's the pursuit of happiness or pleasure...for others intellectual development
 - iv. Humankind has been seeking to fill the void of meaning created by sin with all manner of things other than God since the fall.
- 3. But Christ has provided the solution to our problem of despair – it is Him!
 - a. Because eternity is already in our hearts, we know that there is something after death, even if apart from the Word of God, we don't know what it is
 - i. That knowledge is what produces the anxiety about life's end – we die but then what?
 - ii. And that's the problem in today's culture of despair that has been unhitched from God's Word
 - iii. If you don't know what comes after death or don't think *anything* comes after death then what is the meaning and purpose of life.
 - iv. If life is nothing but despair and toil until you die then in that frame of mind, you might as well get it over with and at least the meaningless cycle will end – hence deaths of despair!
 - b. But Paul gives us the antidote to our despair in Colossians, **“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”** (Col 3:1-2)
 - i. The quest for meaning and purpose in life has always been and always will be answered with God – it's what we were created for and what Christ came to restore through His life, death, and resurrection – HOPE!
 - ii. Listen to our Lord as He speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, **“whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** (Joh 4:14)
 - iii. Put your faith and hope in Christ alone, let Him be the meaning and purpose of your life, let Him fill the void that you could never fill no matter how many power balls or mega millions you win!

iv. Listen to what the Word promises those who trust in Christ “**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...**” (Gal 5:22-23) Christ is the answer to our despair!

ⁱ <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-04-02/godlessness-america-religion-secularization>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.statnews.com/2021/12/29/deaths-of-despair-unrecognized-tragedy-working-class-immiseration/>