

*Even after we have experienced the worst, why do we find it so hard to convince ourselves there's nothing worth living for?*

It's a wonder that the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, from which our first reading is taken, ever made it into the Old Testament. For the Old Testament, while it takes to task the sins of history, is basically a testament of hope (as is the New Testament). But the *Book of Ecclesiastes* dissents from that theme of hope. Like some modern skeptic it questions whether, despite the Bible, life has any meaning at all.

*Vanity of vanities – a lot of hot air – that's all life amounts to*, says the speaker. Sure the other books of the Bible encourage you to do good and avoid evil and you shall be rewarded – but Ecclesiastes says, *What profit have we from all the toil we do under the sun? One generation departs and another comes – and nothing really changes . . . What has been, will be again; what has been done, will be done again.* [Like Presidential Elections] *Nothing is new under the sun . . . Human beings have no advantage over the beasts; everything is wind . . . I have seen all manner of things in my vain days: the just perishing in their justice, and the wicked living long in their wickedness . . .*

Still one must admit that, skeptical though Ecclesiastes may be, he writes beautifully – close to poetry. Take for instance his description of old age (with which I can identify). He says regarding the breakdown of the body:

*the days will come when the guardians of the house (one's arms) tremble, and the strong men (the legs) are bent; . . . when the doors to the street (your ears) are shut, and . . . all the daughters of song (the birds) are quiet; when one is afraid of heights, and perils in the street; when the almond tree blossoms (your hair turns white) . . . and the caper berry is without effect (no more taste), . . . before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl broken . . . and the life breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, all things are vanity!*

Yet even though Ecclesiastes eloquently admits he doesn't understand the way things are – he wagers that God must have something up his sleeve – and recognizes *there is nothing better than to rejoice and to do well during life.*

So whenever you're down and out, pick up Ecclesiastes and let the Holy Spirit lend you its inspired words to work out your aggravations.

Or listen to Denise Levertov during one of her spells of uncertainty. She says, *I know this happiness / is provisional.* She knows the looming presences of suffering and fear have only withdrawn for the moment: *but ineluctable this shimmering / of wind in the blue leaves: // this flood of stillness / widening the lake of sky: // this need to dance, / this need to kneel: / this mystery:*