

“Escaping From Vanity Fair”

by Kris Goorsky, Director of Christian Formation



Christian & Faithful Pass Through Vanity Fair

Prayer of Illumination

God source of all light,

By your word give light to our lives and light our path.
Bring us together though we have to be apart.
Guide us on this path that we are travelling together.
May your words bring us clarity.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Scripture

Grace and peace to you. Our scripture today is from Isaiah ...

Isaiah 55:1-9 (NRSV)

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;

let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Escaping From Vanity Fair”

This morning, we continue on our road in the book *“Pilgrims Progress”* by John Bunyan. Picture the two men walking and chatting through a green meadow, Christian and his friend, Faithful. They see in the distance someone coming towards them. As he grows closer, they see it is another mutual friend named, Evangelist. Evangelist had been advising Christian on his journey every so often and Christian seems expectant to see what he has to say now.

Is he on the right path? Is Faithful a good companion? Now what?

Evangelist assures him they've been doing good, on the right path. But warns, don't think it's all going to be easy. There are still trials ahead. There will still be decisions to be made, choices, some are right, some are wrong. LIFE STILL HAPPENS!

Evangelist leaves Christian and Faithful to continue through a meadow and in the distance, there is a fair. In your mind, picture a county fair, a carnival, and a crowded market all in one. This is the town of Vanity Fair, a place of consumption, excess, and frivolity.

As they enter the town the townspeople begin to notice these two, dressed differently, speaking a different language. The townspeople thought they were barbaric and bringing trouble and worst of all, these two refused to buy anything!

Christian and Faithful tried their hardest, not to make eye contact, plugging their ears, telling people, we only want truth.

Well the townspeople couldn't believe it and brought them to the judge, pointing out their clothes, speech and the fact that they won't buy anything! They were clearly not one of them.

The Judge sentenced Christian and Faithful to be put in a cage! Making an example of them to other prisoners, he put them in chains, and beat and tortured them.

At Faithful's trial, he had some supporters for truth and innocence. But they were not called upon to be witnesses to defend him. People with names like Envy, Superstition and Pickthank were called. A jury comprised of people named, Lord Luxurious, Lord Desire of Vain and Glory, Lord Lechery, Sir Having Greedy, Mr. No Good, and Mr. Liar sentenced Faithful to death.

Christian, back in prison awaiting his trial, is able to escape and continue on his journey with a new friend, Hopeful.

Our scripture today from Isaiah speaks of all the things we could want, even extras beyond what we've heard of before. Milk, mentioned only 18 times in the whole Bible, rich food, wine, for FREE! for EVERYONE! Quite the contrast to Vanity Fair and to our society today.

As Isaiah was trying to get the Hebrews back on track, Isaiah saw the inequities and evils that had become a part of human society. People had become settled and forgotten their purpose as people of God. They were seeking and acquiring material security, consumed with physical needs. Sound familiar at all? Much like ourselves in today's society, we consume great quantities of stuff, right?

How much do our lives look like Vanity Fair? Struggling to acquire more and more stuff. It reminds me of a bit by comedian, George Carlin:

"Everyone has a little place for their stuff. That's all our houses are places for our stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff you probably wouldn't need such a big house. A pile of stuff with a cover on it."

...



"When you're on an airplane, you look down and see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. Some people have so much stuff that they have to rent another place to keep it!"

"We go on vacation and have to pack 2 suitcases full of our stuff and sometimes bring an empty suitcase to bring back more stuff!"

How true is this for so many of us. Our stuff, our need for stuff, too often controls our lives. And when we live like this, what happens to our hearts? Pope Francis said it best as he reflected in his 2015 letter to the Catholic Church on the environment:

"A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment."

In some instances, since the pandemic, we can be paralyzed by TV, catching the next binge-worthy show on Netflix. We're mesmerized by the Internet, consumed by cell phones, sometimes doing one thing to the next barely taking a breath between. Or doing them at the same time, right? Our non-pandemic life might have been different than now but, we sometimes lived frantically, running in all directions, exhausted and lost. Why do we do this? What are we longing and searching for?

Let's take a minute and look at our own lives. What area of your life is in poverty right now? Where are you thirsty?

Over and over again we see God providing what we need, for free, all we need to do is ask. As God gave the Israelites in the wilderness manna, in Isaiah, He reminds people again and again that He will provide what we need. Oddly enough the Israelites couldn't hoard the manna. It couldn't be kept or stored, as it would rot. You could only gather what you needed for that day. No one had too much, yet everyone had enough. Everyone's needs were met in this perfect little gift with a tidy delivery and refuse system. This is against everything we understand about our economy today.

By God not putting a price tag on our needs, offering the same to everyone, for no one to possess or control, our innate behavior to control and consume is lost. God supersedes our human condition... again.

...

As God continues to remind us of this gift, it's like how a parent might remind a child of what it's like to be on the other side of the "fence." I'm reminded of a story about a very wealthy father who took his son on a trip to the country for the sole purpose of showing his son how it was to be poor.

They spent a few days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. After their return from the trip, the father asked his son how he liked the trip.

'It was great, Dad,' the son replied.

'Did you see how poor people can be?' the father asked.

'Oh Yeah,' said the son.



"Farm Night Sky" by Ben Canales, [Night Photographer](http://www.theStarTrail.com)

'So what did you learn from the trip?' asked the father. The son answered,

'I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end.'

'We have imported lanterns in our garden, and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others.'

'We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.'

The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added,

'It showed me just how poor we really are.'

Too many times we forget what we have and concentrate on what we don't have. What is one person's worthless object is another's prize possession. It is all based on one's perspective. Sometimes it takes the perspective of a child to remind us what's important.

Traveling through the town of Vanity Fair, after which the fashion magazine we know of today is named, exploring Isaiah's words about God's abundant gifts to us, might move us to reconsider our stuff, re-assess our attentiveness, review our use of time.

In my personal efforts over the last couple of years to refocus, recharge and realign, I found Jen Hatmaker's book *"7: An Experimental Mutiny Against Excess"* very helpful. I used seven weeks, each of which focused on an area of my life. For example, seven days using only seven types of electronics: two email accounts, one cell phone, one apple watch, radio, GPS, and one laptop. Or the week where each day I donated or threw away seven things A DAY. It's not as easy as it all sounds.

I also recently tested out a "Screen Shabbat" suggested by Tris Thorp, author, and blogger. I tried to go 24 hours without any screens. Phone, TV, watch, computer, or tablet. It wasn't easy and I only made it 18 hours, and that's with sleep! But what I found was a peacefulness and freeness to my 10 waking hours. I accomplished so much in that time and was able to stay on task!

However, you might feel about over consumption, minimalism or the great screen debate, it's encouraging to know that our Lord meets us wherever we may be. All this stuff we spend so much time, effort, and money on... these things will fade away, but God's promises stay and last forever. When we focus on God's promises, more than our stuff, it is then we will never be spiritually hungry and will know what brings genuine peace.

This week, consider taking some time to take stock of where your focus is. Is it more on God's promises or more on your stuff? And then take time to notice how you feel. Try focusing more on God's promises of life and just see what happens!

Amen.

Short Story and Sermon Credits:

"Father Son Story," Dan Asmussen, Facebook, July 21, 2020

"Christian and Faithful Pass Through Vanity Fair," Pilgrim's Progress (1844). Engraving after a drawing by H.C. Selous

"Stuff Picture," An aerial view of houses in a residential suburban neighborhood.

"Farm Night Sky," Ben Canales, Night Photographer, <https://www.theStarTrail.com>

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