What is the meaning of life? Whoa, now that is a big question to start a sermon with. But it is a big and important question, one that crops up into our thinking at various times and in various ways. What is the meaning of life? It is a question that, at some point, nearly everybody in the world asks themselves.

Many people give many different answers. Some people say they find meaning in life in their family or their work or their service in the community. One of the most famous Tahitian paintings of Paul Gauguin was entitled: “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” While it is a beautiful painting, many of us would wonder whether Gauguin was qualified to answer the questions -- since he vowed to commit suicide after he finished the painting. Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Nietzsche have tried to address the question, each coming up with different answers of course. Depending upon the philosopher the answer might be knowledge or wisdom or virtue or tranquility or duty or friendship or power. Many philosophers and scientists today, influenced by Darwinistic evolution, have come to the conclusion that there is no “ultimate meaning” to life; for them, life is meaningless. The only ultimate purpose in life is the continuation of our genes. On a lighter note, Michael Palin, at the end of the Monte Python movie The Meaning of Life opens an envelope for this final answer: “Well, it's nothing special. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.” (Note to Proclaimers: You may wish to choose different foci on non-Christian attempts at “meaning” that will fit for your local hearers. The Gauguin or Monte Python suggestions may or may not fit with your hearers.)

Many Christians are surprised when they read the book of Ecclesiastes and find how even wise King Solomon struggles with the meaning of life: 1:2 “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” In the chapters following, Solomon intensely questions whether meaning can be found in anything, be it wisdom or pleasure or work or riches; everything, he concludes, is vanity. For 11 of 12 chapters, Solomon shares with us a pretty pessimistic viewpoint about life, at least life from an earthly perspective, until he closes with this thought about the meaning of life (12:13): “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

The Apostle Paul was aware of the many and various Greek philosophical answers to the question of the meaning of life. In fact in at least one circumstance that we know of, Paul debated with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens and proclaimed to them that the meaning of life was in Jesus and his resurrection. In his, shall we say, sermon on Mars Hill he proclaimed to the men of Athens (Acts 17: 26-27): “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each of us…” Paul then quotes a couple of
Greek philosophers who make the point that our purpose in life is to be God’s creatures and children. Then Paul goes on to tell them about the resurrection of the dead, including Jesus’ resurrection, which enticed some to believe and others to mock.

When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Colossian Christians, he had never met them. He had only heard of their faith in Christ through his friend who had planted the church there, his fellow servant of the word, Epaphras. But Paul knew that the Colossians were in danger from false teachers infiltrating into their ranks, of being taken “captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world” (see 2:8). These false teachers were apparently trying to convince them that the meaning of life could be found in secret knowledge and new wisdom, in seeking out “perfection” through various religious practices. Paul knew that all humankind was looking for the meaning to life – and that we were all searching because of our disconnection from our Creator, first through the sin of His first created humans Adam and Eve, and then continuing with our entire human race; we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Paul knew that the Colossians were seeking the meaning to life – and that they -- and he -- had found it in Christ Jesus. Paul knew that the fullness of God, the Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, had come and dwelt among his human creation. This God, in Christ, had fulfilled even King Solomon’s search for meaning in Ecclesiastes. The mystery of this search had been hidden for ages and generations, but was now revealed even to Gentiles in Colossae and here in (insert name of your locale). Solomon knew that riches and glory and earthly wisdom and labor could not bring about purpose and meaning, but now one greater than Solomon has been revealed, and He, Jesus, has reconciled the world and us to God, and in this reconciliation we now know of the riches of the glory of this mystery. Solomon ended Ecclesiastes with “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Because we do not fear God and keep his commandments perfectly, we should feel alienated from God and struggle with having a purpose in this otherwise purposeless world. But Paul reveals to us that God has fulfilled this prophecy in Christ. In Christ alone are God’s commandments kept – for us. In Christ’s afflictions God judged every evil deed, every secret thing we have ever done, and then he forgave us for the sake of Christ’s innocent afflictions and death. In Him alone do we have meaning in life.

It is my great privilege, as your pastor, to proclaim this same Jesus, and the mystery of the riches of his glory to you, the people of (insert church name here) week after week, for a total of some # of sermons and # of Bible studies. I have been blessed to have learned this great and glorious mystery of Christ from other pastors myself, both seminary professors I had and other pastors who taught me both before and after my seminary days. They proclaimed Jesus to me, warning and teaching me with all wisdom, just as they learned it from the generation before them, and those from the generation before them, all the way back to and dependent upon Paul and the other apostles and prophets our Lord chose to reveal himself to. Many of you first learned this wondrous and mysterious message about Christ from your parents, and from other pastors and teachers you’ve had through the years and when you were members at other congregations. I have also had the great privilege of baptizing # of you here at
baptizing them into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving their lives meaning through their baptisms. In the history of this congregation, I and the other servant-pastors here have been blessed to administer #_ total baptisms. In addition, it has been my duty and my honor, my purpose in this life, to administer the Lord’s Supper to the members of this congregation some #_ times in the past #_ years. For all of these things, I can say along with Paul “for this I toil (a good and blessed toil), struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.” I know that I could never do these things on my own by my own energy or power, but I give thanks to God that his Holy Spirit continues to work among us powerfully, that “we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Note to Preachers: You will obviously need to do some research and counting to fill in these blanks with your local information, if you decide to use this paragraph. If you have been at your congregation only a short time, you may wish to modify this to include your other parishes. Or if you are in a team ministry, you may want to include all the baptisms and sermons and Lord’s Supper administrations of the team rather than you as an individual).

We proclaim Him. I, like Paul, always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when I pray for you (1:3). I give thanks for the partnership in the Gospel (Philippians 1:5) we have together. I would not be able to proclaim Him with the authority of the pastoral office, warning and teaching with all the wisdom of God’s Word, were it not for the fact that you have entrusted me with the call to this office. Thank you. It is a wondrous privilege you have granted to me to share God’s Word with you and with this community in your name. I pray that you are proclaiming him to others outside these walls as well, with your friends and neighbors, so that those who are struggling to know the meaning of life will sense that you know Christ and are at peace, stable and steadfast, by being reconciled to God through Him. We proclaim Him – and I give thanks for the partnership in the Gospel with more than 6000 other congregations in our Synod, as well as our seminaries and universities and other schools and agencies and sister church bodies around the world that proclaim Him with us. In Christ alone we live and move and have our sense of meaning. May we all continue in this faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that we have heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven (1:23).

Philippians 4:7 ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.