Introduction: Today’s global economic uncertainty has a way of paralyzing nations, corporations, small business owners, families, and individuals. Yesterday, The Washington Post said that Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner confirmed that Aug. 2 remained the deadline for raising the $14.3 trillion debt limit. On that date the United States will begin to default on its obligations without additional borrowing authority, setting in motion the "catastrophic economic and market consequences of a default crisis."

Headlines like these can drive us to one of three extremes: apathy (Who cares?), despair (Is there no hope?), or reckless abandon (It’s time to party!). The Teacher suggests a different response and this is our sermon in a sentence – The uncertainties of life call us to a deeper dependence upon God as we seek to be engaged in productive and fruitful service for His Kingdom.

Intro story: Too often we are paralyzed by our lack of knowledge and other uncertainties and so miss opportunities to do productive and meaningful things. A story is told of an elderly gentleman who loved playing golf. But he was almost eighty, and his vision was not very good anymore. He always had partners with him when he went out to play so they could watch his ball and tell him where it went. One day his buddies did not show up. It was a beautiful day for golf, and as he waited at the clubhouse he got more and more upset that he wasn’t going to get to play his round. Another elderly man in the clubhouse saw him and asked, “What’s wrong?” The man explained his predicament: “I was really looking forward to playing golf today. But I don’t see very well anymore, so I need someone to watch the ball after I hit.” The second man was even older than he was, but he said, “That’s no problem. I’ll be glad to ride around with you. I’ve got 20/20 vision. I can see like a hawk. You just hit the ball, and I’ll watch it fly right down the fairway.” So they went out on the first tee, and the old man hit the ball right down the center. He turned to his spotter. “Did you see it?” The man replied, “I saw it all the way until it stopped rolling.” “Well, where did it go?” The older man paused for a moment and then said, “I forgot.”

Even the best-laid plans don’t always work out—that’s a reality we all have to face every day. So how should you respond when you’re not sure how things are going to turn out? Will you pass up a good game of golf because your buddies failed to show up? Will you be paralyzed by the uncertainties of life and let good chances to be fruitful slip by? Or will you take a risk? Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Please stand if you are able for the reading of Ecclesiastes 11:1-6. “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your
seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good."

If you were to place this text in a college syllabus it would probably show up in an Economics class - the social science that analyzes the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

We will condense Solomon’s wisdom into two admonitions: *Take risks but do so wisely;* and, *Use every opportunity you have to be fruitful and productive.*

- **Take risks, but do so wisely.**

1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.

To cast … bread upon the waters is a metaphor without any contemporary parallels, so interpreters are uncertain about its meaning. Two suggestions are most common:

- It referred to maritime commerce. Sea trade in the days of Solomon was risky business. The journeys were long and hazardous, and with limited communications the owners had no idea how their ships and cargo were faring. The bottom of the Mediterranean Sea is decorated with the remnants of shipwrecked vessels. According to I Kings 10:22 Solomon had a fleet of ships that returned every three years loaded down with gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.

- In older Jewish and Christian interpretation, this verse was taken to refer to giving to the poor, in which case finding it again represents others being kind in return (pay it forward). “Cast your bread upon the waters” was understood to mean “give bread to the oppressed”. Giving to the poor, like sea trade, also involves real risk. The secular man would say giving to the poor is like pouring your money down the drain. We don’t know what the poor will do with the money. And usually, we will never see the money again. But the Teacher says, “after many days you will find it.”

- Whatever the literal meaning, the figurative lesson seems to be that a daring, seemingly foolish, distribution of your assets will yield returns in the future.

In both the Old and New Testaments God calls us to care for the poor, to cast our bread upon the waters, to share with those who have less without concern for being repaid. As we look at these representative passages notice the consistent promise that God will reward us for our obedience, our *bread* will return to us in some manner.

**Proverbs 19:17** says, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.”

**Deuteronomy 15:7-11** God is speaking through Moses, “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall
open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. You shall give
to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the
LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will
never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to
your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'" (vs. 7-11)

Luke 14:12-14  "He (Jesus) said also to the man who had invited him, ‘When you give a dinner
or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest
they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the
crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you
will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.’"

Why should we give to the poor? Not because it is a guaranteed way to get rich. It has no more
promise to reward our obedience.

The late Ray Stedman said, “The idea expressed here is one of openhanded generosity. This
phrase, ‘Cast your bread upon the waters’, was a proverb in Israel for what looked like wasteful
expenditure. No one would take good bread and throw it in the river. But here we are enjoined to
do that very thing. This is not encouraging us to be spendthrifts, to thoughtlessly and carelessly
give away our money, spending it like a drunken sailor. What is meant is, be willing to take a
chance where a real need is evident.”

How do we know if a need is legitimate, or if we are being deceived? At church we have
numerous guidelines in place to make sure we are helping to meet real needs with the funds you
place at our disposal. I have had the privilege of dispensing Benevolence Funds 17 years.

We have occasionally been “burned” when attempting to help those who come to us from
outside our church family. When this happens we make adjustments to our policy and our
practice with the hope that we can still assist those who have genuine needs.

Another way to be a good steward is to give your money or goods through reputable
organizations like World Impact, Good Will, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, World Relief,
or World Vision to name a few. Some families we know are using Christmas as a time to give to
the less fortunate. Rather than giving gifts to their adult children they make a contribution in that
child’s name to a local charity or national relief organization. I also know that some of you have
“financially sponsored” an orphan through organizations like Global Fingerprints (our Free
Church ministry), or Compassion International. These are all wonderful ways to “cast your bread
upon the waters”.

Is it risky to cast your bread upon the water? Of course it is. And because there is risk involved
Solomon gives us another investment principle: diversification is essential in a time of economic
uncertainty.

Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.
Another way of saying this is “don’t put all your eggs in one basket”. If we apply this principle to sharing with the poor it means “Give to as many as you can, and then some. Be generous. You do not know what disaster may have been warded off by your gift.” After all, once we give, we leave the results up to God.

Because many of you contributed regularly to our Benevolence Fund last year, we were able to help those from our church that were in economic difficulties to the tune of over $70,000. You have no idea how many times your gifts were the answer to the prayers of those who received assistance. This year your giving has allowed us to be helpful again. To date we have been able to provide $47,500.

No one plans to be in a financial crisis. Life comes without guarantees. One day you’re a happy healthy teenager – the next day a diving accident leaves you paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of your life. One month the stock market is steady – the next month it plunges, costing you half of your investments (9/11 and 2008 for instance). One day you are gainfully employed, the next day you are given notice to have your desk and office cleared out by 5:00 p.m.

For some of us, this kind of uncertainty has a paralyzing effect – instead of “dividing our portion to seven or eight” we are tempted to hoard what we have (be it little or much) in anticipation of the day when something really bad is going to happen to us.

Solomon encourages us to be generous while we can – because WE NEVER KNOW when misfortune may strike, and we will no longer be able to give as much as we can now – or, because WE NEVER KNOW when the present opportunity to help someone may pass, never to come again.

This scripture challenges us to launch out, to take risks, to be generous and at same time be wise.

**The second admonition** also relates to economics, and especially economics in the agrarian culture of the Old Testament. As Kansans we are not unfamiliar with this culture; some of you grew up on a farm or worked on a farm as a young person. The second admonition is:

**Use every opportunity you have to be fruitful and productive.**

This admonition is based upon verse 6,

“In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”

Verse six is a logical conclusion that follows from the truths stated in the preceding three verses. We will look at them individually. The first proverb can be summarized: **We cannot modify what God has ordained.**

3If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,  
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

In a world of uncertainties there are still things we can count on, things God has ordered by creation, laws of nature. However all we can do is observe and report on them, we cannot adjust them. Clouds full of rain will empty themselves upon the earth, but when and where they do it is known only to God. Meryl Teller and his fellow meteorologists make their best educated guesses, but they will admit it is only a prediction, a forecast.

Clouds were meaningful signals in Palestine, letting the inhabitants know the rainy season was upon them. In our advanced scientific age we can do more than look at clouds, we can analyze them and even chase them.

The Discovery Channel shows exciting Storm Chaser videos, featuring fearless men and women in their specially designed and equipped SUVs who hunt down tornadoes to capture stunning severe weather video and valuable meteorological data.

Local news stations compete to have the latest in technology so they can claim to make the most accurate forecasts.

It is a law of nature, when the clouds are full they will drop their rain on the earth. We can count on it, it is a certainty.

In a similar fashion in the place where the tree falls there it will lie until it decays or is moved by man or natural processes such as floods or tornados.

This verse from a Country & Western song by Clint Black may capture this truth:

Wherever you go there you are  
You can run from yourself but you won't get far  
You can dive to the bottom of your medicine jar  
But wherever you go there you are.
The lack of rain in western Kansas has received national attention. Morton County qualifies as being in exceptional drought, the driest rating established by the US Drought Monitor. It is drier than it was in the driest years of the dust bowl. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has designated 21 counties in Kansas as natural disaster areas because of the drought that has blistered the area’s crops. Some counties that have an average rainfall of 19 inches have received less than two in the last 10 months.

What do we do in these situations? A Morton County resident said, “God has not seen fit to give us rain”. Other residents are making hard decisions like selling cattle because there is no feed. Worrying is not a good option but is often a choice we make. Hasn’t God promised to provide what we need when we need it? After addressing the futility of worry in Matthew 6, Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (vs. 33)

Verse 4 follows with another proverb we summarize: Over analysis will lead to paralysis.

“4He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

Meet the wind watchers, the contemplators of clouds.

Farmers in Solomon’s day and the Kansas farmer of today have one thing in common – they prefer ideal weather for planting and harvesting. Unlike the Palestinian farmer, the Midwestern wheat grower takes advantage of present-day technology to make his best estimate as to when he should plant or harvest. However, it is still a guess, no matter how well-informed the guess may be. The farmer who waits for the most opportune moment to plant, when there is no wind to blow away the seed, and to reap, when there is no rain to ruin a ripe harvest, may never do anything but sit around waiting for the right moment. And so, the seed stays in the barn, or the crop is ruined in the field.

Dr. Seuss says everyone is waiting. “Waiting for the fish to bite or waiting for wind to fly a kite. Or waiting around for Friday night or waiting perhaps for their Uncle Jake or a pot to boil or a better break or a string of pearls or a pair of pants or a wig with curls or another chance. Everyone is just waiting.”

Solomon exhorts us not to be like this farmer. Don’t wait for conditions to be perfect, because that will never happen. It is true that the wind and rain might come and destroy the harvest. Today’s work might be ruined and you might have to do it over again tomorrow. But that’s okay. Today’s work might succeed as well or better than tomorrow’s. And if so, then you will be able to reap the rewards for both. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin - real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way. Something to be got through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life.” ~Fr. Alfred D'Souza
There is no better time than the present to exercise faith. I believe that God has you in the very place you are today to bring him glory. If you wait until you “have more time” to do something you never will. The “perfect opportunity” begins now—while you are able to use it. If you are married but waiting to have a family, there is no perfect time to have kids. You will never have enough money, energy, or patience. Once you have children, don’t wait for the right age to spend time with them. Before you know it, your kids will be all grown up and out of the house.

This hit me like a bolt of lightning when our three sons ranged in age from 9-12. I found myself thinking, “Won’t it be nice when they are all grown up and out on their own.” What a selfish thought! How did I think they would get to that place, and did I want to have a part in that process? I made a commitment that day to be more intentional about the time I spent with them on both an individual level and as a group. Looking back on those years now it seems like it went so fast. Only God knows the difference that decision made.

Actor John Wayne (1907–1979) once said, “Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway.” So how will you step out in faith today? What will you do in an attempt to stop playing it safe? Will you take some risks for the kingdom of God? Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

The summary of the proverb in verse five is – Nothing in this world is outside of God’s control.

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones (or how the bones grow) in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

We probably know more about the human birth process than Solomon did thanks to advances in science and medical technology. However there are still so many things that we do not know, such as the way of God, or the work of God, or the thoughts of God.

God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and whose ways are past finding out, is entirely sovereign over all nations, people, and things, everything seen and unseen. Nothing is outside of His control, nothing.

The fact that God is in control of everything:

- provides us with stability in an uncertain world. No matter what happens on earth God is still on HIS throne, reigning and ruling with truth and justice.
- gives us the courage to do our work faithfully

This brings us to our final verse. Stated as a proposal - Since

- We cannot modify what God has ordained; and since
- Over analysis will lead to paralysis; and since
- Nothing in this world is outside of God’s control; therefore

“In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which (God) will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”
You don’t know which seed will prosper, that sown in the morning or that sown in the evening so cover all of your bases. Plant the seed and leave the harvest up to God.

This advice is in keeping with what Paul said – “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Gal. 6:9-10

My own planting experience is limited to a small vegetable garden in our back yard. The last two years I have begun gardening in February by planting seeds under a grow light in the basement. I wanted to have about 20 tomato plants to put out in the garden and about the same amount of pepper plants. Because I did not know how many seeds would prosper I planted extra: 18 seeds for each of three varieties of tomatoes, and 9 seeds for each of 8 varieties of peppers.

Most of the seeds grew so I had more than enough for my garden and to share with family, neighbors and friends. When it came time to plant them in the garden I took a risk and planted three weeks earlier than the Eagle garden editor suggested, because if we had a late frost I had a reserve of plants in the basement.

The uncertainties of life may drive some to despair or inactivity. The Teacher says: Because we don’t know which of our seeds (works or gifts of kindness) God will prosper (although I suspect He uses them all in one way or another), we need to make the most of every opportunity.

Jesus was not in doubt about his purpose in life, “my food (what I find nourishment, fulfillment in) is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” And what was the work Jesus came to do?

When his forerunner, John the Baptist, introduced him he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world!” Jesus described his mission in terms any farmer would understand. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit”.

In saying this Jesus was describing his coming death and burial in the ground, and resurrection that would follow. Jesus sowed his very life when he died on the cross for our sins. The result of his saving work is forgiveness and eternal life for all who believe. Jesus did not share his grace and forgiveness with only seven or even eight, but with thousands and tens of thousands of sinners like you and me who turn to him in faith and repentance. He said to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”.

Jesus sends us out as he sent out his first disciples to sow the Word, to tell people that Jesus loves them, and that he died and rose again so they can have life. What opportunities has God given you to be fruitful and productive? How do you sow the seed of God’s Word?

We sow God’s Word in our own hearts when we read, study, memorize, and meditate on it. We sow the Word when we teach it to our children in our homes, when give someone a Bible or share a verse of Scripture. We sow the Word when we share it with folks in the hospital, or the nursing home, or in a small group at work or in our neighborhood. We sow it when we go to
China, to India, to Myanmar, to Zambia, and to the Czech Republic. The word of God comes with a wonderful guarantee – “it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Isaiah 55:10, 11

If we are faithful to sow the seed of the good news of Jesus, the day will come when God will reap a harvest of salvation. It will be a surprise harvest to us, but not to Him.

The uncertainties of life in the 21st century may discourage us. Lack of success may cause us to question the wisdom of investing time in people, or giving to the poor. Often times it seems better to play it safe, to not take risks. As a result we may be missing out on God-given opportunities to be sowing seed. Are you sowing the seed of the “good news of Christ” at work, in your neighborhood, within your family? Have you considered sowing seed outside of Wichita, in another state or country?

Every week we are reminded to pray for our missionaries, many of which are home-grown, and a good percentage of them are under the age of 40. Each of them has decided to take a risk, to be bold for God despite the uncertainties of life.

The Word of God which we have received today calls us to use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely to advance the Kingdom of God.

Here is the big question: Will you be a wind watcher or a seed sower? Will you be like the person described in verse four (“He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.”) a wind watcher who neither sows nor reaps, or a seed sower? Phil Ryken said, “What God will do, you never know; but you will never reap if you never sow.”