

### *Wisdom*

When I arrived to start work at my first church, I noticed a curious thing about the set-up of the office. Even though we Presbyterians are doggedly egalitarian in our governance, whether intentionally or not, the office had a certain “hierarchy” about it, for lack of a better word. The Head of Staff occupied the largest, corner office of the main suite of offices. It was appropriate; she hosted conferences in her office with some regularity. Then as one walked down the hall, one passed the next most senior associate, the theologian-in-residence, then the minister of evangelism, and so on, until one reached the areas for Children’s Ministry and Youth Ministry. In between all of these offices were cube cities where the administrative staff made their offices, and these too were sort of “ranked” in terms of size and location. It was a veritable totem pole of offices.

My desk was in the parking lot.

Much to my surprise, after a few weeks, I began to notice another pattern. One particular member of staff, way down the hall, in an office with no window, had a regular flow of visitors. Her office was tiny.

But she managed to fit a rocking chair in the corner, and every time I walked by, it was occupied. Some days it would be an administrative assistant, some days it would be the senior pastor, some days it was the youth minister – that rocking chair had more traffic than the Schuylkill.

One day, I saw the rocking chair empty, and so I knocked on the door.

“Come in. Have a seat,” she said.

So, I did.

“How are you doing,” she asked?

For the life of me, I don’t how it happened, but an hour later, I left. And I had been to church, so much was the restoration of my soul! As I walked out a colleague said, “I see you’ve been to our resident wise woman.”

What makes for wisdom? Where is it found? Who is wise?

The Bible tells us the story of Solomon and his wisdom.

The Wisdom of Solomon was parodied a number of years ago on the sitcom *Seinfeld*.

(I realize that I am showing my age.)

Perhaps you know the episode, the one where Elaine finds a vintage bike with great big U-shaped handlebars and tassels on the handgrips? In a fit of pain she promises anything to Kramer if he can just fix the crick in her neck. He does, and then he claims the bike as his own. But

Elaine's crick in her neck returns and so she attempts to reclaim the bike. Kramer insists that they go to an impartial mediator and so they draft Newman to judge the case.

Newman determines that the only fair solution is to cut the bike in two, giving half to each. Elaine agrees. But, Kramer says he would rather give up the bike than see it harmed. Newman concludes that only the bike's true owner would rather give it up than see it harmed, and awards the bike to Kramer.

That story is ripped straight from the pages of the Bible. It's meant to illustrate *wisdom*.

But what makes for *wisdom*?

Both the book of Proverbs and Psalter give the same answer: *The fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom*.

In the Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman – she marks her life with rectitude and clear purpose. She is portrayed over and against *folly*, whose life is marked with frivolity and licentiousness. Proverbs draws a sharp dichotomy between the way of wisdom and the way of folly – and with good reason. The people of Israel have endured the consequences of the folly of David and Solomon and each of the subsequent kings. The results were families ripped apart from one another, the faith community exiled from the temple and what it saw as the right worship of God, and a whole generation left rootless and ungrounded. One scholar notes, “Family, religion, and some measure of Jewish identity within the larger Persian empire were the real stakes in the conflict between Woman Wisdom and her nemesis Woman Folly.”<sup>1</sup>

And so, as the people lived with consequences, a way of looking at the world emerged. It is a way marked by *choices*.

The prophets of Israel made clear God's call to the people: It is a way of life marked by awareness of what it means to be in the image of God.

To be in the image of God is to be called to the ways of God.

And what did God command?

If you read the historians, it is to worship only God.

And if you read the prophets, it is to attend to the things that matter to God, such as caring for those who are unable to care for themselves. Such as welcoming the stranger and the alien resident in their land.

Over and over, however, a different path is chosen. When the sins of David, and then Solomon were lived out in their successors, the whole thing came crashing down. As the Israelites languished in captivity, they wrote these books from which we read today, the book of Proverbs and the Psalter, books that we refer to as the *wisdom literature* of the Bible.

And what is wisdom? It begins with the fear of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Perdue, *Proverbs* in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP, Louisville, 2000) p148

I imagine there might be two questions in your mind right now. The first is, "What is the fear of the Lord?" The second might be, "And why is my new minister of my progressive church preaching about the fear of the Lord?"

A partial answer to the second question is that these texts are what the lectionary dished up today, and I believe deeply that honesty in preaching – and in our faith - requires engaging the whole witness of scripture, even and especially when it makes us examine what we believe.

But before we answer the first question, "what is the fear of the Lord," I want to say something about *fear*.

Fear is a powerful motivator. And it has been used down through the years by some in the church as a powerful motivator. There is a particular thread of theology, and frankly of preaching, that uses fear to coerce behavior, particularly to coerce the behavior of marginalized people to conform to a certain, narrow view of God's creation.

This is not a godly usage of the Word of God.

The practitioners of such coercion would do well to take a long look in the mirror as to whom the topic of the fear of the Lord should apply.

Because firstly, the fear of the Lord is the recognition that God is God, and we are not.

To fear the Lord is to recognize that we are the *subject*, not the *author*, or even the *arbiter*, of God's redeeming grace.

To fear the Lord is also to recognize that without the redeeming grace of God, we will not become whole.

*To fear the Lord is to recognize that God is God, and we are not.*

The way of wisdom is the recognition of all of these things. And when we live in the recognition of all of these things, we choose the way of wisdom.

Indeed, the letter to the Ephesians picks up this language of choosing between wisdom and folly and casts it in light of the life of the Christian.

The life of the Christian has a distinct ethos and pattern. Indeed, Ephesians reminds us that the life of the Christian is marked by establishing and remembering our identity in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Ralph Martin writes, "Terms like 'wise' and 'foolish' and maybe 'filled with the spirit' indicate how this wisdom instruction may have entered the Christian moral theology at an early stage. [such as we were just discussing] The point is that believers are cautioned not to wander aimlessly through life's maze or become victims of moral stupor."<sup>2</sup>

The author then goes on to identify that moral stupor in very specific ways, drunkenness and debauchery, ways that I presume were based upon the particular experience of the church in Ephesus.

The question that should trouble *us* is what would constitute moral stupor in our own lives?

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Martin, *Ephesians* in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP, Atlanta, 1991) p62

I don't mean that question in any sort of judgmental or preachy way, but as a legitimate point of self-awareness in our spiritual development.

When I think back on the experience of *wisdom*, such as I experienced in that rocking chair, it seems to me that wisdom requires *honesty*. It requires honesty with self, and one another, and God.

That is why we confess our sins so often.

Because God is God, and we are not, and we stand in need of redemption.

The fear of the Lord is the knowledge that faith in Jesus Christ is not something we can dabble in and do when convenient. Faith in Jesus Christ is our constant companion, shaping how we live, guiding what we do, redeeming our past mistakes and changing our future course.

Because, you see, before the grace of God works wonderfully in us, first it works us over.

*Wisdom* is paying attention to what God is doing. And it is paying attention to what God wants us to do.

I feel certain that for each of us, at least I hope this is true, we have encountered someone who offered us wisdom. It's so important to have those people in our lives that we can count on for a truthful word, a moment of compassion... who is that for you?

My friend Doug Oldenburg, who regularly reminds the church that we drink from wells we did not dig, and harvest from fields we did not plant, says we should *thank* those people who offered us wisdom on the way – that we should go home, and get out a sheet of paper, and write a note and say thank you for what they have meant to us.

Because *wisdom*, finally, is not a solitary exercise.

Wisdom comes from God, and it comes through the voice of God's people. I do not believe it is accidental that the words from Ephesians that follow the call to live lives of wisdom are then words exhorting us to engage in the life of praise and thanksgiving, as the author writes, "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts. Giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is a call to praise the one who *is* God, a call to praise the ground of our being, the God that will ground our lives.

Comings and goings have a way of clarifying things, and as we begin in earnest our life together as pastor and congregation, I would like to share with you my final words to my congregation in Atlanta, they were words describing the pattern and ethos of the Christian life, that it is marked with kindness, and generosity, and finally and most importantly, a life whose seasons are marked out with praise.

Because, friends, in the life of wisdom, praise of the one who *is* God grounds every endeavor of faith. And so today I would like to begin with you with the same story with which I ended with them.

It is a story that Anne Lamott tells, of a young girl who got lost one day in her neighborhood.

A passing police officer noticed her sitting on the curb, and seeing that there was no mother or father nearby, stopped his patrol car and got out to see what was the matter.

He asked her where she lived, but she couldn't remember it.

And then he asked her parents' phone number, but she couldn't remember that either.

Then, the police officer, wisely noting that a little girl couldn't have gotten too far from where she should be on foot, suggested that she get into the back of the patrol car, and he would drive around slowly until she saw her home or her parents.

Still nothing.

Just when it seemed that it hadn't worked, the officer saw a look of peace come into the little girl's eyes. And she said, "It's okay. You can let me out here. I see the steeple of my church, and I know the way home from here."

May it ever be so.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and the mother of us all, Amen.*