

Reflection

Proverbs 1: 20-33

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Title: It is Wise to Fear the Lord

Prayer: Holy One, we thank you for this time in which to explore the words and lessons passed on to us from those who journeyed this path before. Keep our ears open and hearts attuned to what you want us to learn today. Amen.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Kings we learn of Solomon's wisdom. It says that God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment and breadth of understanding, and that his wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east. It says he wrote over 3000 proverbs.

The book of Proverbs is attributed to the wisdom of Solomon, and is part of the Biblical wisdom literature. Some scholars believe the book can be attributed to the generations of wisdom teachers who came after Solomon, in charge of forming the moral and practical training of young people.

These books of wisdom are designed to help us live well in God's world. They are an accumulation of insights from God's faithful people through the ages. Think of them as an encyclopedia of sorts to give us a head start on how to live in God's world.

NOT how to bend the world to the way we want to live; but how to grow and change and mature in order to live in God's world.

As we learned last week, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job make up the core of the wisdom literature. Proverbs is seen as simple teachings, Ecclesiastes adds a critical flavour, and Job adds the wisdom of having gone through it all. Proverbs offers the "general rule of thumb." Then when we get into Ecclesiastes and Job we start to explore the exceptions to the rules.

Proverbs are learnings that people share. Google "how to write a proverb" and you'll find websites dedicated to helping you craft one. Most of the time they seem to be

asking you to think of something you learned or something you're worried about as the starting point.

So, if I've had my bike stolen a couple of times I might come up with the proverb: a locked bicycle is not safe from the hands of the thief.

Or, if I'm worried about people making fun of me when I talk about God I might say: my faith is the sole/soul of my shoe upon which I stand.

What we read when we read Proverbs are life lessons. Guidelines. Not promises or guarantees. Not rules of law or prophetic statements. The book of Proverbs is a tool to give us a head start by heeding the words of those who have come before.

But the entire book is not a series of catch-phrases. It begins with an introduction; some instruction and then a plea from the voice of Wisdom.

In the introduction we hear "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" and in the passage Janie read Wisdom is focusing on – and lamenting – those who did not choose the fear of the Lord.

"The fear of the Lord" means to have reverence and awe for God. To fear the Lord is to understand our place in the universe. We are not God and we aren't the ones who get to decide what is right and what is wrong. Our job is to be humble before God, to recognize God's power and love – to revere God – and in so doing open ourselves up to God. Which also means heeding God's call for us even if it might feel challenging or inconvenient to the way we've structured our lives.

In this passage we find Wisdom in the street, in the square, at the busiest corner, at the entrance of the city gates. Picture her on the steps of the Art Gallery, or on a Sky Train platform, or in the middle of the food court of Park Royal. She is standing where everyone can hear her, but she knows that not everyone will listen.

Wisdom is personified here. She is associated with God and with creation. I tend to picture God as the needle and Wisdom as the thread. As God creates, perhaps sews the universe together, the flowers, our respiratory system, the wings of a butterfly, the arms of an octopus, the rings of a tree – as God sews all these things into being, Wisdom is the thread that stitches into all God creates.

And, so, Wisdom is available to us, all the time. Wisdom is stitched into who we are. We just have to pay attention and learn what she is saying to us and how to live it.

And, wisdom is not just knowledge. The Hebrew word “Khokhmah” means more than mental activity, it also means applied knowledge. So, we don’t just think to live in God’s world, we act and move and build and bake and draw to live in God’s world.

Now, I couldn’t help but make this connection. Here we have Wisdom personified as a female in Proverbs, and she’s telling us to live our lives with a reverence for God, a reverence that might take our lives into directions we hadn’t foreseen; ... and the United Church of Canada nationwide has lost four female pillars of the church this summer.

Pillar isn’t the right word, there is no right word. Four women – and there are countless more living and dead – who have given themselves to God in such profound ways as to lead the church, bolster the church, hold up the church, inspire the church, populate the church, promote the church, do the behind the scenes work of the church ... you name it. They have been part of the back-bone of the wider church – nationally and internationally.

And some of their stories are recorded with the BC United Church archives. Archivist Blair Galston spearheaded an oral interview project with many powerful women of the church. Just go to the Pacific Mountain Region website and search for “Making room for women.” You can read the interview or listen to the audio.

This summer Jocelyn Pritchard died on July 26<sup>th</sup>; Louise Rolston and Muriel Shephard both died on August 13<sup>th</sup>; and Lois Wilson died on September 13<sup>th</sup>.

Among these four they worked for and attended at least 40 churches across the country; organized choirs for adults and children, founded micro loan organizations for women in Africa; held positions of Chancellor of Vancouver School of Theology, Chair of Conference Interview Board, Moderator of the United Church of Canada, and President of World Council of Churches, worked for justice and inter-denominational relationships locally and globally; wrote books, wrote music, wrote letters, worked for the Catholic Worker newspaper, dedicated themselves to the learning experience of students, Women’s Concerns, sat on – and influenced – more committees than we could name, spoke out ... and loved the church with all of who they were.

Wisdom speaks indeed.

Wisdom is available to all of us – we just have to pay attention and learn what she is saying to us.

Near the end of the passage, Wisdom speaks of the fools who will not choose the fear of the Lord and says their waywardness and complacency will destroy them. “But,” she says “those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Remember, the proverbs aren’t guarantees or promises. They are guidelines.

“Live at ease” does not mean living on easy street. Wil Gafney of Brite Divinity School says not to read being at ease as “not having any difficulty or distress but rather as being at ease no matter what comes.” She talks about how a healthy reverence for God’s movement in this world and in our lives allows us to be more secure in our relationship with Wisdom. It’s not that we are “insulated from disaster or evil, but that we are inoculated.” No matter what comes our way we can be immune from fear, we can have the resiliency to endure, to survive and then to thrive no matter how life unfolds.

This is where that choosing God’s path even if it is uncomfortable or inconvenient to us comes in.

Elaine James of Princeton Theological Seminary says that to seek wisdom is to participate in the pattern of the natural world, making choices to benefit the whole, not merely securing one’s own advantages.

Proverbs is not a book that teaches us about God per se. It is a book that teaches us how to live a responsible and happy life.

And Wisdom, at the start of the book tells us how. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Yet she cries to us “how long” until you listen? Look, I’m pouring my thoughts out to you, I’m making my words known to you, I’m stretching out my hand to you. And no one is paying attention.

And, she knows what’s going to happen. And we know too ... because we’ve done it.

When the storm hits, when we are panicked, sleepless, distressed and stuck in the chaos that’s when we say “hey, where are you? I need you now.”

I imagine when Lois, Louise, Muriel and Jocelyn were far from home, the first “fill in the blank”, faced with an unwavering wall of tradition, dismissed, tired, or wondering if they were the one for the job, they also asked “hey, God, where are you? I need you now.”

And, I imagine they were in the positions they were in because they had a healthy reverence for God, and had a practice of paying attention to how Wisdom was present and what they could learn from her. I imagine they were in the positions they were in because to varying degrees they had given themselves over to God’s pattern for their lives ... which included the whole around them, not just themselves.

“The fear of the Lord” – reverence for God – is an ongoing practice. To fear the Lord is to remember our place in the universe; to be humble before God, and to recognize God’s power. In so doing we are shaped by God, regardless of its inconvenience or challenge.

Has Wisdom taught us anything today by standing out in the public square telling us to pay attention? If we were to turn our learning into a proverb what might it say:

“Wisdom waits, but not forever.”

“Hearing God’s voice is not the same as listening.”

“To have reverence for God is to surrender space in the heart.”

“God’s voice grows stronger with practice.”

“The thread that tethers one to God will fray with silence.”

“Humans tire quickly on a path of their own making.”

May we all hear the voice of Wisdom. And when we hear it, may we all listen. And when we listen may we all heed. And when we heed, may we all say yes to God. And when we say yes to God, may we all live lives of ease.

Amen.