

**‘From Whys? to Wisdom’
16 September, 2012
Proper 19B
Proverbs 1:20-33
Mark 8:27-38
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Prayer: Giver of insight, Holy Wisdom, settle among us and within us now: flow as you will beneath and between the words I offer, that your true Word might be heard and lived. Amen.

Earlier this year, a Coptic Christian from California who said he considers Islam to be a cancer, made a crude movie that he said was intended to be a provocative political statement against the religion.¹ This past week, Muslims across the Middle East and beyond were incited to what sometimes became violent—even deadly—demonstrations in response, claiming retaliation for the American filmmakers’ lack of respect for Islam and its founder. The whole thing has created serious political and diplomatic challenges, but everyone knows the strains are not simply due to a movie created by an ignorant and fearful Islamophobe and the consequent over-reaction by offended Muslims.

Why is it that we, in 2012 A.D.—more than six thousand years after human history started being recorded—are *still* trying to figure out how to live peaceably and respectfully alongside those who aren’t like us?

While I’m at it, I’ve got a few more ‘why is it?’ questions. Why is it that the rich in this world seem to keep amassing more and more, whilst the poor and the vulnerable continue to see what little they have being stripped from them? Haven’t we outgrown that? Why is it that, although we know many of the lies propping up the systems and arguments that blame the vulnerable entirely for their own misery, we still let it happen?

Why is it that given all we know about what it takes to thrive, billions of children and young people are nevertheless growing up in conditions of poverty, physical and psychological danger, abuse, neglect, hunger, disease, or warfare—getting the message in all sorts of ways that the rest of the world either doesn’t care about them, or can’t do anything to help?

And one last ‘why is it?’ question: We’ve been hearing for years about the urgency of doing something *now* (even a decade ago!) to stem the rising tide of global warming and its inevitable environmental and social repercussions. The impact will be annoying for some parts of the globe, but downright devastating for others. An article published on Friday reports that the arctic sea ice has reached a record low and is melting still at an ever-faster rate.² Why is it that nations filled with educated, intelligent people haven’t managed to do better than this?

Aren’t we listening? Aren’t we paying attention? Where is the wisdom in our collective human response to all of these realities?

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/15/police-hold-anti-islamic-film-maker>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/sep/14/decline-sea-ice-arctic>

According to our Old Testament lesson, she's right there in the thick of it all: she's out in the streets, at the busiest corner, at the entrance of the city gates—always with her voice raised in desperation. But no one's listening.

Scripture's Wisdom Woman speaks for the first time here in Proverbs. She's got a powerful tone, one that's more than slightly tinged with reproof. In fact, I don't know about you, and maybe it's just because my boys are the ages they are, but I can't help feeling like Wisdom Woman *must* be the mother of a teenager: "How many times do I need to say this to you? How long . . . will you love being simple? How long are you going to delight in your scoffing and your spurning of understanding? If only you would listen to me!!" she chastens.

But the way she speaks also sounds very similar to how God speaks through other prophets—like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos.

And because there are echoes of God's ways of speaking elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, much of what Wisdom Woman says in our reading this morning is quite troubling—because it sounds far more human (and human on a very bad day) than it sounds divine to our ears:

"Because you refused to listen to my call . . . [and] rejected all my advice and would have none of my reproof," she says, ". . . I in turn shall laugh at your doom and deride you when terror comes . . . when anguish and distress come upon you. When they call to me, I shall not answer; when they seek, they won't find me." (Prov. 1:24-28, REB)

Columbia University's Old Testament Professor Kathleen O'Connor argues that Wisdom Woman's harsh language and strident tone is all because "she knows that the consequence of deafness to her words is spiritual calamity."³ O'Connor writes, "Whether or not Wisdom is God in this text, she reveals herself like God, makes demands like God, and promises freedom and life to her followers like God. Whoever she is, her appearance destabilizes complacency, closed-heartedness, and death-dealing behaviour that comes from ignorance, hatred of knowledge, and refusal to commit to the way of Wisdom."⁴

So, setting aside for the moment the shrill and threatening words of a woman desperate to get the attention of the ones she's trying to save, what exactly is the 'way of Wisdom'? What is it that leads to the heart or essence of wisdom?

For three consecutive weeks, we are assigned readings from the Book of Proverbs this year. It's the only reading from Proverbs we get across the three years of our Revised Common Lectionary, except in one of the Advent series. Last week, Richard gave us a very helpful introduction to the subject of proverbs and wisdom—several of you even shared with us your own favourite proverb or wisdom saying. But when we were asked how we might define wisdom, or wisdom's ways, that was a bit more difficult, wasn't it? We could agree that fundamentally, it's a kind of knowledge—but it's more than just knowledge; it's a sort of good judgment, a kind of character that accompanies a depth of reflection and understanding, all stemming from what John Calvin would have called a 'teachable spirit.'

In Proverbs 1:7, we read that, "The fear of the LORD is the foundation of knowledge; it is fools who scorn wisdom and instruction." And Psalm 111:10 proclaims, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and they who live by it grow in in understanding." (REB)

³ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Someone asked me last week, “So, what is this ‘*fear of the LORD*’ all about?”—intimating that the concept largely doesn’t resonate with today’s ideas about God. ‘Fear of the Lord’ is not about cowering in terror before God, in the way that Dorothy and her friends stood sniveling before the Wizard of Oz before he was unmasked. ‘Fear of the Lord’ is actually an ancient way of referring to right behaviour—listening and obedience—by a person of faith in relation to God and creation.

As the Rev’d. Kenneth Carter says, “Listening in the Proverbs is always linked to obedience, and obedience is participation in the practices that lead to wisdom: hearing and reading Scripture, prayers of confession and intercession, humility before others and God. This wisdom has very little to do with knowledge in the service of power, and more to do with insight that is in service of God and neighbour.”⁵

He continues, “In an insecure world, this is grounded in the voice of God, calling us into the way that leads to life. This wisdom is present among those who live in communion with God’s people and, at times, in resistance to the persistent refrains of the culture. Wisdom is finally possible as we participate in the practices of the God *who is wisdom*.”⁶

Do you remember who it was that identified Jesus as the very wisdom of God? It was the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, in the first chapter. You may remember the passage—it’s the one where Paul is talking about true and false wisdom, arguing that “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is an offence to Jews and folly to Gentiles, yet to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God *and the wisdom of God*.” The apostle concludes with the proclamation that “the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:22-25, REB).

I asked you something of a trick question just then. Because in our Gospel lesson, we heard Peter recognise Jesus as the *Messiah*. But although he was clever enough to recognise God’s promised Messiah, even good old Peter didn’t quite grasp divine wisdom at that point. Because when Jesus started talking about all the things he was going to have to undergo—great suffering, rejection by the religious leaders, eventually being killed . . . well, bless him, Peter tried to do a bit of P.R. management and took Jesus aside. I’m sure he was offering his version of a pep-talk about needing to keep a positive angle on things if he wanted to gain more followers—winning more flies with honey, than with talk about suffering and rejection and death, and all.

But Jesus turned the table on him, and gave Peter a dressing down, as he called all of his disciples around him. Jesus explained the wisdom that makes absolutely no sense to a world of people who believe that the only way to live abundantly is to get as much as you can for yourself; he counseled those who would follow him that they would have to take up their own instruments of self-denial and self-sacrifice in order to enjoy the abiding peace, joy, and freedom that he knew. “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

I think perhaps the poet who penned Proverbs overstates his case just a bit. Based on the example we have in Jesus Christ—wisdom incarnate—I’m pretty sure God doesn’t actually laugh at the calamities we bring on ourselves. In fact, my Christian conviction is that God weeps with us and

⁵ Kenneth H. Carter, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4, p. 52. (Italics mine.)

⁶ *Ibid.*

struggles with us in them, and is the source of any strength we ultimately muster to get up and try again.

“Still, it is difficult to argue with the truth of Wisdom Woman’s warning. When we forget about the ways of God, we often get ourselves into some terrible predicaments. When we think we’re beyond the basic lessons of loving justice, doing kindness and walking humbly with God, we often end up doing things and saying things we regret. When loving God and loving neighbour as we love ourselves are mere platitudes for us, it seems that disaster often finds us. It will always be true that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. It will also always be true that we have some responsibility for what happens to our families, our communities, our world, and ourselves. [The answer to all of my ‘Why is it?’ questions is, I’m convinced, that we haven’t been heeding the right voice.] We need to pay attention to this brash messenger Wisdom and her insistence that ‘fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.’”⁷

Finally, let’s remember that, for all of the foreboding and heavy-handed rhetoric of warning, the speech from Wisdom concludes with a promise—one of peace. She says, in her concluding verse, “Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.” (Prov. 1:33b NRSV) It’s not a promise that misfortune or tragedy won’t befall people of faith—that would ring false, and be a hollow promise.

What Wisdom promises is that for those who trust in the Lord and heed her instructions, they will not need to fear or dread what might come. Like Jesus, who knew the he end was destined for yet journeyed toward it with confidence, courage, and calm, so we need not dread the future, nor be governed by fear, come what may. Because Wisdom shows us how God—who was with us before our birth, and journeys with us in this life—will also meet us at our destination. And that ultimate destination is not the death, destruction, and ultimate powerlessness that this world fears so much; rather, our end is one of joy and love, freedom, peace, and life eternal.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁷ H. James Hopkins, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4, p. 53.