

Wisdom: God's Right Hand Woman

8-19-18 Proverbs 8 and 9

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Have you ever heard someone who's feeling overwhelmed say, "I just don't know where to begin"?

And what answer do we usually give?

"Begin at the beginning."

So, let's do that.

Let's begin at the beginning of Scripture because it is there we find the foundation of everything that is to follow.

When we peel back all the layer upon layer of other stuff, at the very heart of creation and at the very heart of every person, this is what we find:

Genesis 1:31a *God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

That's the starting point, and when we lose sight of that we are easily distracted and discouraged by our personal failures and by the chaos of current events.

The foundation for the Sears tower is a massive cement structure buried 100 feet in the ground.

In addition, the foundation is surrounded by 200 circular caissons, which are huge cement-filled cylinders bored an additional 100 feet below and set in solid bedrock.

What would happen if contractors had miscalculated and tilted the foundation by just an inch?

That would just be a slight amount 100 feet down, but the 110-story building would tilt and collapse, which is what happens if we get the foundation – the starting point - of our faith wrong.

A lot of churches start their teaching somewhere else: with how humans have messed up, which leads them to the premise that we are inherently flawed and God is angry at us.

By the way, that was not the teaching of the early church until about the fourth century.

If you start with the assumption that you are inherently bad, and that God is so disappointed and angered that He wants to punish you for eternity, then you end up in a very different place from the creation narrative that says God delights in you and in all the other people of this world.

Did God know that we'd sometimes make a mess of things?

Yes, and that there'd be consequences when we do, which is the third chapter of the creation narrative.

But then for page after page, story after story, and book after book, the Bible shows how God is on our side through every kind of conflict and confusion you can imagine.

That's because God loved His creation and His people – and still does.

In recent months, some of you have told me about your sense of despair for our country.

Both Republicans or Democrats have said that you feel like helpless bystanders to our leaders' firestorms of Tweets, the growing denial of science, and the resurgence of overt racism.

Some of you have told me that your family is so caught up in these tensions that brothers aren't speaking to sisters, and sons aren't speaking to mothers.

Several of you are questioning how you can love people while also thinking they've got it so wrong.

Now, in a very real and personal way, we're having to deal with the question of how we can hold contradictory feelings without being torn apart by one or the other.

That's one reason why I want us to look at a teaching that runs throughout the Bible called the Wisdom tradition.

It's a big topic, so we'll briefly look at a bit this morning and then return to it now and then in the months ahead.

When you look at wisdom teachings, you see that they are aimed(at) the same issues we are wringing our hands about today: social priorities, violence, caring for the soil, and personal financial decisions.

The Wisdom tradition teaches us how to live in a conflicted world, and to not be surprised or overwhelmed by the crises of the day – there's nothing new under the sun.

It lays out a pathway to wellbeing in a world that does its best to pull us down.

A wise person lives with a steady sense of calm through it all.

There's this wonderful passage in Proverbs:

Proverbs 14:13a *Even in laughter the heart may ache,*

We can ache at the condition of the world ... and still laugh.

Living the ways of wisdom expands our heart so that we become big enough to hold more than one emotion.

Wisdom says that it is possible to feel that your colleague is bullheaded and ignorant, and yet to respect her as a child of God.

It is possible to come face to face with how you've screwed up, but know that God loves you and will use what you did for something good.

You can be outraged as you read your daily newsfeed ... but you don't have to let anxiety own you.

On the other hand, if we allow our heart to contract, we'll become anxious and bitter.

Then, we label people good or bad, right or wrong, worthy or disposable.

Constricted hearts have no room for grace, understanding, or reconciliation.

Now I mention Proverbs because here we meet Lady Wisdom.

Wisdom also appears in Ecclesiastes and in the teachings of Jesus, and James tells the early Christians that they can call upon Her any time.

James 1:5 *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*

The bible personifies Wisdom as a woman.

The bible says that She worked side-by-side with God during the earliest moments of creation.

Proverbs 8:22-30 *GOD sovereignly made me—the first, the basic—
before He did anything else....*

I arrived on the scene before Ocean,

yes, even before Springs and Rivers and Lakes....

Long before GOD stretched out Earth's Horizons,

and tended to the minute details of Soil and Weather,

And set Sky firmly in place,

I was there....

And then I staked out Earth's Foundations,

I was right there with Him, making sure everything fit.

So, Lady Wisdom held the blueprints when light was separated from darkness, land from water, and we were given life.

Then, Lady Woman stood beside God as He surveyed all they'd done and pronounced it is *good and very good*.

So, to know Her is to know that life is good, and to understand how things are meant to work.

Proverbs 3:13-15 *Blessed are those who find Wisdom,*

those who gain understanding,

for She is more profitable than silver

and yields better returns than gold.,.,,

nothing you desire can compare with Her.

But we live in a world that competes with Her ways.

I stopped by Ralphs the other day to pick up a few last-minute vegetables for dinner – well, actually a half gallon of ice cream for milkshakes - and standing in the checkout line I surveyed the gossip magazine headlines.

Now we are facing any number of humanitarian and environmental crises, but what were the headlines shouting at me?

There was something that the editors felt was terribly important about what Kanye West may have said about Kim Kardashian, there were before and after pictures of some 22-year-old starlet claiming that because of her amazing new diet she had shed 20 pounds, and breaking news about Taylor Hill's new eye makeup.

Do people really buy these rags?

Well, yes.

Celebrity gossip is a \$3-billion a year industry.

But there's nothing new under the sun.

Proverbs portrays Wisdom and Folly as two women each calling for our attention from the beginning of time.

Proverb 8:1-7 *Does not Wisdom call out?*

Does not understanding raise Her voice?

At the highest point along the way,

where the paths meet, She takes Her stand;

beside the gate leading into the city,

at the entrance, She cries aloud:

“To you, O people, I call out;

I raise My voice to all humankind.

Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say;

I open my lips to speak what is right.

My mouth speaks what is true,

for My lips detest wickedness.”

Wisdom invites us into her home to dine on delicious, life-giving dinner of meat and wine that she personally prepared.

Meat and wine were luxuries not usually consumed by common people.

Wisdom tell us that the food and drink she prepares are metaphors for the banquet of life that comes from walking on the straight path of understanding.

But Wisdom isn't the only voice in town.

Proverbs 9:13-18 *Folly is loud;
she is undisciplined, and without knowledge.
She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the city,
calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way,
“Let all who are simple come to my house!”
To those who have no sense she says,
“Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!”
But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.*

Wisdom or Folly – the path we choose determines whether our life will be blessed or cursed.

There are a lot of loud, undisciplined, factually-ungrounded voices out there investing billions of dollars to grab our ears and eyeballs.

The 24-hour news cycle fuels its ratings from tragedy and inflammatory half-truths.

Advertisers line up behind blatantly biased news hosts who belittle and chastise their guests.

Politicians court voters by stoking their most insidious fears.

The decision of where to invest our attention determines our state of mind, our blood pressure, and the kind of person we become.

Wisdom says
Proverbs 4:23 *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of your life.*

This is part of why Wisdom says (Proverbs 8:13) She *hates pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.*

Wisdom begins her promise by famously saying
Proverbs 1:7 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

The Hebrew tradition has its particular understanding of these words.

First, “fear”, is *yirah*, is standing in awe of the magnificence and power of something.

It is reverence for the majesty of God.

It is humbling because it can overwhelm us and is a real threat.

Walking in fear of the Lord is a threat to my ego – but not to me.

Walking in fear of the Lord exposes my sins for me to face, and confronts my carefully crafted self-image.

No doubt that’s threatening and painful, but in the end, it frees my true self to emerge.

The Hebrew for “knowledge” is *daath* but this isn’t just an accumulation of facts, it is being skillful, knowing how things work ... you might even say having street smarts.

Throughout Proverbs, the fool is contrasted with the wise man.

The fool is content with his ignorance, ignoring Wisdom’s rebuke.

The fool blabs on and on, defending his ignorance without being curious.

In Proverbs, the fool falls into catastrophe, and Lady Wisdom laughs at him when he does.

Proverbs 1:23-26 *Repent at my rebuke!
Then I will pour out my thoughts to you,
I will make known to you my teachings.*

*But since you refuse to listen when I call
and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand,
since you disregard all my advice
and do not accept my rebuke,
I in turn will laugh when disaster strikes you;
I will mock when calamity overtakes you—*

Wisdom is what Kerstynn would call a real badass.

The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hakmah*, and is about more than being educated, or getting good grades and high SAT scores.

It is learning from life experience, questioning our own motives, seeing others' folly so that we don't make their mistakes.

Hakmah is learning the way things work – following Lady Wisdom's blueprint from which the universe was designed.

So, *walking in fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge* is about humbling ourselves so we can prosper and grow.

I was particularly impressed last Sunday with Melissa's impromptu testimony during closing circle.

If you remember, she recited a small confrontation she had in a parking lot during which she got a little snippy with a woman.

Melissa was not happy with herself for what she said.

Melissa then sought out the other woman, apologized and walked away with a little insight.

On the other hand, a fool – to use the Proverbs term – would have continued to justify herself, contriving any number of rationalizations for why she was right to be rude and to stand her ground.

But a wise person, like Melissa, is able to step outside their ego and question what was behind their actions.

Proverbs 10:14 *The wise store up knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.*

Wisdom is a pathway through life.

I've found it helpful to read a few proverbs most days and just reflect on what they may be saying to me.

As often as not, I realize that the crisis that I thought was so pressing and unique is just a replay of what our ancient ancestors faced.

And as often as not, I hear the seductive voice of Lady Folly tempting me to be self-defensive or do something rash.

And there's also the voice of Lady Wisdom saying, slow down.

Be still.

Be prudent – and follow my way.

After all, when all the accusations, guilt and fear are stripped away, I can see that what's really left is *good and very good*.