

**“Wisdom Cries Out”**

**Proverbs 1.20–33**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 13 September 2009**

You just heard an amazing piece of wisdom literature from a collection that was likely brought together about 2,700 year ago. And the collection of proverbial wisdom starts out dramatically and emphatically: “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.” So this female personification, sometimes called Woman Wisdom, is not sitting down for a cozy chat over a cup of tea; no, she is delivering an oration, a speech to warn the people to stop living with their heads stuck in the sand, but rather open their minds to knowledge.

So, what is wisdom?

Is it synonymous with knowledge? No, I can load a ton of knowledge onto my Mac, but that doesn't make it wise (...but think how bad it would be if I had to use Windows Vista). This is true for humans as well. There are some people considered to be experts in their field, but whose knowledge is not melded with a sense of judgment, moral grounding, and ethical constraint. Michael Milken and Bernie Madoff were undoubtedly experts, but they were anything but wise.

Is wisdom equivalent to age? Sometimes, but not always. We all know that “there is no fool like an old fool,” but we also know people who are “wise beyond their years.” Experience comes in many forms, and it is one of the elements that helps to create wisdom.

Is wisdom just a female trait? Even though the Hebrew word *hokhma* and the Greek word *sophia* are both female-gendered nouns, men can be wise, too. Solomon is the biblical figure most often associated with wisdom, and even though he is often associated with the book of Proverbs and with the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, we're fairly certain that he wasn't the author. Wisdom is no more female than God is male, though historically people have made those gendered connections as they tried to make God accessible to humanity.

Is wisdom always connected with God? Certainly there is secular wisdom, but when “wisdom” is talked about in a biblical context, it is presented as a characteristic of God or as a personification of the divine – *hokhma* in the Hebrew Bible or *Sophia* in New Testament Greek. And the familiar phrase in Proverbs regarding a wise disposition toward God is “the fear of the Lord.” It is helpful to me to think of “fear” in this context as “awe” and “reverence,” rather than as the kind of worry and dread that I consider the opposite of faith.

How do we acquire wisdom? How do we pass it along once we have it? A blend of knowledge, experience, moral grounding, ethical constraint, and a timeless sense of faith is sometimes difficult to transfer to someone else. One of the only ways is through long-term exposure, and in our case that occurs through teaching and through community.

As a parent with two sons in education programs here at Plymouth, that's part of what I'm hoping for for my own children: that they will soak up some sense of being grounded in wisdom. And I know full well that it this rather large task isn't something that our staff can do alone. We depend on community.

My son, Cameron, is starting confirmation this fall, which Sharon and Naomi Hoyer are teaching. And one of the key elements for our teens during their confirmation experience is to be paired with a mentor – a more experienced, knowledgeable person who will walk with them through the process of exploring their faith.

Mentor, of course, was a character in Homer's *Odyssey*, though we've made his name into a common noun and sometimes (horrors!) even a verb. If you remember the story, Mentor was the friend and advisor of Odysseus, and it was Mentor whom the great warrior/adventurer left in charge of his household and his son, Telemachus, during his

journey. Mentor had to be a parental figure, teacher, counselor, guardian, role model, challenger, encourager, and advisor to young Telemachus. The task demanded of Mentor a high degree of integrity, knowledge, personal investment, and wisdom –the same job requirements we have for Sunday School teachers.

It is actually amazing to see people at Plymouth embody those qualities as youth leaders, teachers, confirmation mentors, and trail guides. We are privileged to have tremendous gifts, and we are blessed when we share them.

An interesting twist in the *Odyssey* is that Athena (goddess of both war and wisdom) at several points disguises herself as Mentor to have an impact on young Telemachus. So, again we have a female figure stepping into the role of divine wisdom.



Last week, one of our retired ministers stopped by my office and told me how he had scrapped his sermon when JFK was assassinated, when Bobby Kennedy and Martin King were assassinated, and at several points during the Vietnam War. And it occurred to me that I have no real memories of any of those events, which were so formative for a generation to which many of you belong.

For a lot of people my age, the “*Where were you when you heard the news that JFK had been shot*” event was the tragedy of September 11th, which we mark this week. And I couldn’t help but recall the events eight years ago, when I read this morning’s scripture.

“Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.”

The media images that are etched upon my mind are people running down from the World Trade Center as it burned and then collapsed. Calamity. Panic. Whirlwind. Distress. Anguish. All of those are part of my memory.

I think there were some people who really felt that God did desert them and scoff at them in the wake of September 11th.

I was listening to NPR in the car one morning last week and heard an Iranian-American scholar talking about his grandfather, a physician who had been trained in Paris in the 1920s. He was speaking of what Iran in particular and the Muslim world in general seeks from the West. He said something that I found tragic. He said that in his grandfather’s day, what people wanted from us was a set of ideals. And today, what the Muslim world wants from the West is to be included in global trade. He said that greed has taken the place of ideals.

Global trade may be important, but if it is the best thing we have to offer, I would say that our culture is morally bankrupt. And I wonder if that is what many Muslims think about American culture: that we only care about the bottom line. And it was no accident that the terrorists who embraced a fanatical fringe of Islam chose the World Trade Center as a target.

I think that a significant segment of our American culture needs to revisit the wisdom tradition of *Hokhmah* and *Sophia*...to learn reverence and awe for the presence of God in both creation and humanity.

But greed isn’t the whole story; greed is not synonymous with the culture of the West. When 9,000 people turn up at Moby Arena to hear Greg Mortensen talk about peace through education by building schools for girls in Afghanistan, that’s the culture of the West that is worthy of emulation. That is listening to *Sophia*: to love knowledge and to live with a sense of reverence and awe for the sacred in our midst.



The Spanish-American poet and philosopher George Santayana, wrote this poem about wisdom, which I'll read twice through:

O WORLD, thou choosest not the better part!  
It is not wisdom to be only wise,  
And on the inward vision close the eyes,  
But it is wisdom to believe the heart.  
Columbus found a world, and had no chart,  
Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;  
To trust the soul's invincible surmise  
Was all his science and his only art.  
Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine  
That lights the pathway but one step ahead  
Across a void of mystery and dread.  
Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine  
By which alone the mortal heart is led  
Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

I think we must recapture the ability to perceive and reflect “the tender light of faith” and to choose the “better part,” of wisdom, “the thought divine.” We are the inheritors of a great wisdom tradition, both from the Hebrew Bible and from the life and teachings of Jesus. We need, however, not only to use our outward vision, but our inward vision, as well. We must draw upon our faith, which reinforces wisdom, self-giving love, and social justice. That is why we are here this morning, doing what we do. May our wisdom be fueled by knowledge, understanding, compassion, awe and reverence for God, creation, self and other.  
Amen.