

“The Better Part of Wisdom”

Proverbs 1.20–33

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 14 September 2003

Isn’t that an amazing piece of scripture to have fall on the day when we remember the tragedies of September 11th: “Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease without dread of disaster.” I have to swallow hard as I think of how that might be applicable to us in this country. If there is one thing that has become a persistent reality for us in the last two years, it is that we have *not* lived at ease, *nor* have we lived without dread of disaster.

But, before we get wrapped up in the 21st century, let’s take a look back at least 2,600 years to the concept of wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Did you notice that in the text, wisdom is personified, and that the character of wisdom is female? (That probably doesn’t come as a huge surprise to about *half* the congregation.) But, let’s dig in a little deeper into this concept of “Woman Wisdom.” In our reading, she addresses men and women alike in the parts of the city where traditionally judges and prophets would be heard: in the square, at the busiest corner, at the entrance of the city gates. She speaks with a position of divine authority.

So, who is this woman? Wisdom in Hebrew is *Hokhma* and in Greek is *Sophia*, female nouns in both languages. In the eighth chapter of the book of Proverbs, she says this about herself: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.”¹ And in chapter 3, we find that “the Lord by wisdom founded the earth.”²

So, what is *Sophia*: some kind of a demigod who pre-existed with God? Perhaps, but I don’t think that’s it exactly. It sounds even a little like the prologue to John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God.” Now, usually, we hear the translation of the Greek word *logos* as “word,” but that’s just one way to look at it. *Logos* is also the root of our word, “logic.” Try this translation on for size, and see if it sounds at all like *Sophia*: “In the beginning was intelligence, and the intelligence was with God, and the intelligence was God.”

Intelligence, wisdom, *Sophia*, *logos*: I would suggest to you that there is, in fact, a strong connection between Woman Wisdom and the *logos* of God. So, if you’re looking for the female aspect of the divine, look no further: you’ve found her!

And like a prophet crying out at the city gates, she provides the voice of God. What is she saying? She castigates us for turning our backs on her: “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 get the idea that she’s a little miffed because humankind is good at ignoring the wisdom of God.) Then... “when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you... I will not answer ... they ... will not find me.”



Think about it: have we, as a nation, experienced these things in the two years since 9/11: “panic, calamity, distress, anguish?” I’d say we have, especially in the days that followed the attacks, but also in our approach to the rest of the world over the past two years. We have been neither wise nor judicious nor prophetic in our foreign affairs.

¹ Proverbs 8.22-23

² Proverbs 3.19

One part of wisdom that I've become acquainted with, both as a minister and as a man, is the wisdom of grieving. It's healing for people to openly weep at the loss of a family member or a friend. It's healthy to be temporarily in denial, to be angry, at a loss – as long as those stages move toward acceptance. My fear for our country is that we, unwisely, short-circuited our national grieving process after 9/11 and turned to national vengeance. We got to the anger stage, and it's there that we are stuck.

Who knows how many people, civilians and military, were killed in Iraq? Why haven't our media been pressing our government to collect and release such information? Perhaps it is because we don't want to know. That's our denial of the truth. I can guarantee that the number exceeds those who were killed in New York; Somerset County, Pennsylvania; and at the Pentagon. And I grieve when I see the long list of Americans, mostly in their 20s, who have given their lives in Iraq.

We have squandered a avalanche of good will. In the days following 9/11, I received an email from a Canadian childhood friend, who looked me up online after we hadn't been in touch for 30 years. He wrote to me to say, "We're with you!" I heard from church friends in South Korea, expressing their condolences. I got a message from the Mennonites in Colombia with whom our churches in Connecticut are in partnership, praying for us, and they wrote, "we are accompanying you, extending our love and solidarity to our family in the North." Do you remember people in France expressing *their* solidarity with us, saying, "We are all Americans!"

Oh, how far we have come! How much good will we have squandered! How much wisdom we have ignored: "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..."

Hear these words of biblical wisdom from Ecclesiastes, and see if you hear resonances in our current global situation: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice."³

We have ignored the wisdom God has reflected toward us. We have tried the "go it alone" road without other nations or the UN, and we isolated allies who would help "lift us up." And while we struggle mightily to jump-start an economy and to provide jobs, education, and basic healthcare, we are called upon to sacrifice not only our national treasury, but also our civil liberties, for the latest installment of the "war on terror." It is neither wise nor just.



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

O WORLD, thou chooseth 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

³ Ecclesiastes 4.9–13

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,” “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.



A wonderful (and wise!) woman colleague, a UCC minister in Atlanta, sent me this reflection from the Dalai Lama, which he wrote in the wake of September 11th: “If we want the beauty of the world that we have co-created to be experienced by our children and our children’s children, we will have to become spiritual activists right here, right now, and cause that to happen. We must choose to be a cause in the matter.

“So, talk with God today. Ask God for help, for counsel and advice, for insight and for strength and for inner peace and for *deep wisdom*. Ask God on this day to show us how to show up in the world in a way that will cause the world itself to change. And join all those people around the world who are praying right now, adding your Light to the Light that dispels all fear.

“That is the challenge that is placed before every thinking person today. Today the human soul asks the question: What can I do to preserve the beauty and the wonder of our world and to eliminate the anger and hatred – and the disparity that inevitably causes it – in that part of the world which I touch?”

I love the straight-forward way the Dalai Lama puts it: “talk with God today. Ask God for help, for counsel and advice, for insight and for strength and for inner peace and for deep wisdom. Ask God on this day to show us how to show up.”

May we, each of us, be seekers after wisdom, after light, after “thought divine” in all we do. God’s light and wisdom are available to us, but we have to knock before the door will open.

Will you pray with me?

God, as we remember all the lives lost on and since September 11, 2001, help us see your light and sense your *sophia*. Help us to heed the wisdom we find in the Hebrew Bible and let us live out and live into the subversive wisdom of Jesus, helping to be co-creators of your kingdom, which in now and forever. Amen.