***A SPIRIT OF WISDOM AND TRUTH***

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Texts: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-36 and John 16:12-15

 *Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?* That is the question posed by the wise writer of Proverbs, and his answer to his own question is a resounding, “Yes!” Lady Wisdom stands at the crossroads of the city and by the gates of the town with something significant to say, crying out to be heard. She presents her credentials as a working partner with the Lord in creation when the Lord made all things and all people, and she pleads to be heard by all those created people, by those among whom she lives day to day:

*Happy is the one who listens to me*, she advises.

*Whoever finds me, finds life,*

*but those who miss me, injure themselves,*

*and all who hate me love death.*

Wisdom is something to be treasured, something of great value, she claims. “Wisdom is more valuable than pearls,” says the psalmist.

Where then is Lady Wisdom today? Where is her voice heard as we look at the world around us? I suspect that most of us are less sure about the answer to that question than was the wise writer in Proverbs. Where are the voices of wisdom and understanding amid

the existential threat of climate change,

and the war in Ukraine,

and the weekly mass shootings in our nation,

and the pandemic that is now in its third year,

and the flood of refugees knocking on the door of our borders and those of

nations across Europe,

and the rampant inflation that is raging worldwide?

Where are the voices of reason and understanding amid the widening partisan divide that is growing not only among politicians but between neighbors and within families? Most of us are pretty sure that we know where the voices of wisdom and understanding are NOT found these days; we are just having a hard time finding the voices of reason and understanding being raised anywhere, and even in the few places where they are raised, is anyone listening anymore?

 Wisdom, according to Proverbs, is an essential partner with God in making all things “good”. While one might look at a duck-billed platypus or poison ivy and wonder how that is true, the wise writer assures us that it is so. All of creation is shaped by a wise and wonderful hand, and while the writer in Genesis may have neglected to mention Lady Wisdom’s role, the writer in Proverbs confirms it. The personification of wisdom should not be interpreted too literally; our omnipotent, omniscient, almighty God did not lack wisdom and understanding until another deity called Lady Wisdom appeared by God’s side, like Athena growing out of Zeus’ head in Greek mythology. Rather, the writer in Proverbs wants us to imagine a role for wisdom that has value and importance in and of itself. Wisdom is something that describes how God works in creation and in the world, giving shape and purpose to life and to our lives. It is something that is accessible to us, something we are offered; Paul suggests that wisdom is a gift of the Spirit. It is available to all of us who are created in the image of God; we ignore it at our peril and embrace it to our benefit.

 Wisdom is not the same as intelligence. When our son Daniel was in high school, he had to write a paragraph for an English class about something that frightened him. In class the teacher asked the students to share what they had written and offered an example: she was afraid of praying mantises. When she came to Dan and asked what frightened him, he responded: “intelligent people who lack morals.” “Oh,” said the teacher, “I guess that is something to be afraid of.” Wisdom is not just knowing something; lots of intelligent people know things. Wisdom is knowing what to do with that knowledge. As Zora Neale Hurston suggests: “*Learning without wisdom is a load of books on a donkey’s back*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) David Brooks puts it this way:

*Wisdom isn’t a body of information. It’s the moral quality of knowing what you don’t know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

There is a moral element to wisdom, a consonance with God’s purpose for us and for the world. Judgment and discernment, humility and patience, are all attributes of wisdom. It is a distinction not lost on Edward O. Wilson, who observed with noted concern: “*We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom…*”[[3]](#endnote-3)

 I remember when Dolly the sheep was cloned, and the debate ensued about what the limits of that technology might be. Like so many other areas of science and technology – especially medical developments and lately with regard to social media – the question is whether wisdom is keeping pace with the use of new technology. Have we weighed the benefits and potential pitfalls of employing technology available to us? Have we considered not only, “Can we?” but “Should we?” It is in that space between *can* and *should* that wisdom speaks. The world offers its own version of wisdom from a multitude of sources including the Machiavellian: the ends justify the means, the libertarian: if it feels good, do it, and the Puritan: if it feels good, it must be wrong. But God’s wisdom is not like human wisdom; Paul writes that God’s wisdom makes foolish the wisdom of the world. To which wisdom do you listen? Which guides your life and decisions?

 Lady Wisdom speaks God’s wisdom, and that wisdom, according to Paul is the wisdom of the cross. It is the wisdom of self-sacrifice and love, the wisdom of forgiveness and grace, the wisdom of humility and service to others. It is the wisdom Christ taught and the wisdom he showed us in his life, death, and resurrection. It is the wisdom of a Trinity who is one God in three persons. The world calls it foolish, impractical, weak, but the psalmist calls it precious and we call it faithful.

 Wisdom comes to us in many forms – in moments of inspiration, in the voices of others, in the words of parables or Scripture, even in the divine sounds of silence. Those who listen for the voice of Lady Wisdom are wise to listen in all places and times, for God’s Spirit may inspire us in unexpected places in unexpected ways. New Testament scholar Tom Wright cautions:

*True wisdom is both bold and humble. It is never afraid to say what it thinks it has seen, but will always covet other angles of vision*.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

That is not to say that all angles are equally valid or equally true. Wisdom discerns the false from the true, but it is willing to consider different perspectives. Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit of truth would guide them in discerning the truth. It is that same Spirit that inspires wisdom, the same Spirit that was there at creation with God in the beginning, the same Spirit to which we turn in seeking to discern the true from the false – assuming that we want to know the truth.

 A few years ago a poll was conducted that showed that a significant number of people would rather be told something false that reinforced an opinion they held than be confronted with a truth that forced them to change their minds. In other words, some folks don’t really want to know the truth if it will force them to change their perspective or opinion or, horror of horrors, force them to admit they were wrong. And perhaps that is why wisdom is so hard to find these days, for so many folks have hardened their opinions, have stopped listening to anyone outside their own echo chambers, and refuse to admit they might be wrong. It is hubris to close our minds and ears to any perspective that conflicts with the truth as we have known it. But if we believe that the Spirit of truth will guide us, then we need not fear hearing other views or facts, for the Spirit will help us to discern the true from the false. And then we are to follow the truth, though that is not always easy.

 The Church across the years has been especially hesitant to embrace such openness, and it has been hard work for the Spirit to be heard above the din of denials that resist change. But Lady Wisdom keeps calling and thankfully, her voice has eventually been heard to bring about change in the church in views about the evils of slavery, the value of women in church leadership, salvation by grace not works, the blessing of same-sex marriages, and the breaking down of fences that would deny the Lord’s Supper to any who come to the table. God does not give up on us. God perseveres with us, and continues to be present in our midst to nudge us or push us out of our comfort zones toward faithfulness.

And perhaps that is where we are now, confronted by a host of global and national and local challenges in desperate search of wise solutions that will calm our fears and bring peace to our world. Listen then for the voice of Lady Wisdom! Pray for the voice of Lady Wisdom to be heard. Be open to the leading of God’s Spirit, the Spirit of wisdom and truth, even if it leads you in a direction away from where you have been most comfortable. For we are not called to be comfortable; we are called to be faithful. And to be faithful is to embrace the wisdom of the cross which is the wisdom of self-sacrificing love. “Love appears every day for one who offers love,” writes 13th century mystic, Hadewijch of Brabant. “That wisdom is enough!”[[5]](#endnote-5) So it is! Amen

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, Random House: New York, 2015, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Edward O. Wilson quoted by William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, Oxford University Press: 2010, p.7 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Scripture*, HarperOne:2014, p.147 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Hadewijch of Brabant, Beguine mystic, 13th century, quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, July-September 2000, p.33 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)