

3-9-25 Sermon “Wisdom and Word” – Proverbs 8

This Lent, rather than following the lectionary we are going to take a little journey through a part of the Bible we don’t hear very often in worship – the Wisdom Literature. This is the “middle section” of the Bible: Certain Psalms, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, Job. And of course, the source of today’s readings: The Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs is unlike any other book in the Bible. It contains no narrative, no prophecy, no theological reflection. Just 31 chapters of two-line sayings and aphorisms, framed as a mother and a father instructing their children on how to live a righteous life.

While much of Scripture concerns the extraordinary – angels, miracles, epiphanies, etc. – Proverbs is all about the mundane. Love, money, gossip, work, sex, raising children, business, social relationships – this is the subject matter of the Book of Proverbs. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis calls Proverbs, “a spiritual guide for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch.”¹ This is a book about everyday faith.

Now. A series on Wisdom literature means we are going to spend the entirety of Lent in the Old Testament. So I want to start with a little warning about a trap that Christians sometimes fall into when we read the Hebrew Bible.

For, friends, I must tell you, there is a *heresy* going around in Christian circles! It’s even got a name – Marcionism! – named after some dude named Marcion from the 2nd century AD. He was the first to articulate these beliefs, but twentieth-century evangelical pop culture picked it up and *ran* with it. And here’s how it goes:

Have you ever heard someone say:

I like the God of the New Testament. I don’t like the God of the Old Testament.

or...

The Old Testament God is all about wrath and judgement. The New Testament God is all about love and grace.

We’ve heard this before, right? True confession, maybe we’ve even said it before?

Oh...friends, this is bad bad bad bad! Christians say things like this all the time, but it’s problematic for several reasons.

First of all, it’s not true. There is an abundance of tender, grace-filled portrayals of God in the Old Testament. And there are some deeply disturbing, violent, vengeful portrayals of God in the New Testament. Take my word for it or look for yourself – I can give you some scriptures to look up after worship.

Second, this mentality of “Old Testament God – bad!” “New Testament God – good!” is incredibly anti-Semitic. I mean, think about what we’re doing: We’re basically taking the Scriptures of the Jewish people as our own, and then calling them “old” and “bad.” We build up our faith by tearing down theirs, and that is rude and unneighborly. The church as an institution has a long and troubled history of anti-Semitism, supersessionism, and bad behavior toward our Jewish siblings. Let us break with our ancestors on that one. Let us do better.

The final problem with this heresy is that...well...to state the obvious, they are *not* two different gods. That’s the whole point, actually – that the scriptures tell the story of the *one* God, one long arc of salvation history from Creation until the Kingdom comes. And when we separate the two testaments and create a false dichotomy, we are liable to miss the miracle.

So, dearly beloveds, make my joy complete! Make me the happiest pastor in the world and promise me you shall *never* utter such words about an Old Testament God and New

Testament God again! And if you hear someone saying these things, tell them, “Stop! You speak heresy!”

Ok, maybe don’t say *that*. But do gently correct them, expand their view a little bit.

The thing is, friends, when we turn to the Old Testament, like we are doing this Lent, we should expect to see nothing less than God, and nothing less than grace.

We do see grace in this morning’s readings from Proverbs. We meet her, rather. She shows up as a woman named Wisdom.

Did you notice that? Wisdom is not an ideal or a concept; she’s...a character. We don’t try to gain wisdom; we seek to form a relationship with her.

Because, according to Proverbs, wisdom does not mean learning the objective “right” things to do from the objective “wrong” things to do. Right and wrong can change from situation to situation. And in fact, throughout the book, many proverbs contradict each other! One proverb says, “Do not speak harshly,” and another, “Do not refrain from rebuking.” One says, “Never lend money,” while another says, “Lend to the poor.”

Circumstance determines right action. We know this intuitively...and that is Wisdom.

She is intuition; she is relationship; she is *connection* to the Source of our life, love, and being. Through our relationship with Wisdom, we learn to discern the right from the wrong in each situation. And through our relationship with Wisdom – through her delight in us – we learn to delight in God and in one another.

Wisdom is not about the individual but about the community. The goal is not for certain people to become wise, but for the whole of the people to live in relationship with Wisdom. Spirituality is *relational*, the moral order is *relational*, discernment is *relational*. A person cannot be wise alone, by themselves.

And so Wisdom calls out in the streets and the crossroads, in the portales and in the plaza. “Come to my table. Follow in my footsteps. Come live in relationship with me.”

There’s one more thing about this Wisdom Woman. We’ve actually met her before. Listen to her describe herself:

“The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago...When there were no depths I was brought forth, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills...When he established the heavens, I was there...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master worker.”

Sound familiar? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

But wait, there’s more!

We could translate Proverbs 8, verse 22, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work...” but we could also translate the Hebrew “The Lord fathered me – begat me – as his firstborn...”

And verse 24, it could be, “When there were no depths I was brought forth,” but that word *hul* also refers to labor and birth, so Wisdom may be saying, “God fathered me, and then gave me birth...”

“And the Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

You see it, don’t you? Proverbs and John are telling the same story, using different words. In the *one* narrative of salvation history, in the one story of Scripture, both of these authors are

telling the story of how God went from ‘up there’ to ‘down here’, about how divinity itself entered into relationship with humans.

Proverbs calls her Wisdom. John calls him Word. We call him Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, God in relationship. God *is* relationship.

If we turn the page to Proverbs, chapter 9, we see Wisdom setting a table, preparing a feast for the people. She calls out in the streets, “Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed.” We’ve shared that bread and wine before, have we not?

God’s invitation to humanity always involves a meal. Wisdom’s banquet. Christ’s table. The wedding feast of the Lamb. Fellowship hour. It seems the relationship God desires with God’s people is best begun with the breaking of bread.

So friends – let’s accept! Let us walk in the ways of Wisdom and join the feast. Amen.

¹ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, **Westminster Bible Companion** (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2000) p. 12,