

“The World Really Is a Beautiful Place”

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St. Paul’s UCC Church

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Proverbs 8:1-11, 22-31

Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
“To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.
O simple ones, learn prudence;
acquire intelligence, you who lack it.
Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right;
for my mouth will utter truth;
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.
All the words of my mouth are righteous;
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.
They are all straight to one who understands
and right to those who find knowledge.
Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,

or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master
worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.”

For the next three weeks (if I make it before my baby comes!), I am going to be preaching a series on the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. Today, I'll preach on Proverbs; next week, I'll preach on Ecclesiastes; and, finally, our last Sunday in this three-part series will focus on the Song of Songs.

As it turns out, these are books that we preachers don't preach on a lot – but ignoring these books is kind of a recent phenomenon. Martin Luther, the father of Protestantism, called the book of Ecclesiastes “this very beautiful and useful book” which “on many counts deserves to be in everyone's hands and to be familiar to everyone.”¹ Four hundred years earlier, Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk known for his profound spiritual teachings, wrote 86 sermons on the Song of Songs... and never even made it past chapter 3!²

Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux were probably on to something that a lot of us have forgotten today: Wisdom Literature has so much to teach us! And these books can be so beautiful. Our Wisdom Literature (Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs) is, at its core, poetry. These books are the poetry of our faith, gifting us with lovely and evocative images to stir, not only our heads, but our hearts, as well.³

So, let's get to it! Today, we are reading poetry from the book of Proverbs, chapter 8.

¹Martin Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” *Luther's Works*, vol. 15, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), pages 4, 7.

² See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2477.

³*Ibid.*

If I could sum up what this passage in Proverbs is about in just a sentence, it would probably go something like this: *This world really is a beautiful place.*

The world really is a beautiful place. I felt that – strongly – a few weeks ago, when my family and I took a short trip to Lake Okaboji. For the two nights that we were there, after the kids had gone to bed, Matt and I would sit at a picnic table right outside our little cabin. We could see the lake from there, which was a shimmering dark blue; and when we looked up, the stars seemed brighter, somehow, than they do around Des Moines. As Matt and I sat at our little picnic table next to the lake, we never said much (which, if you know us, is kind of like a minor miracle). There isn't much to say, we discovered, when the water is murmuring lullabies and the crickets are calling their last, lonely cries into the night.

There isn't much to say when you realize that the world really is a beautiful place.

Some people have trouble with the book of Proverbs because God isn't mentioned all that often. In Proverbs, God doesn't speak much, doesn't appear much, doesn't do much. But today, well, today is an exception! Today we are introduced to this figure, Lady Wisdom or Woman Wisdom. (The Greek word is Sofia). And it's Woman Wisdom through whom God speaks to the church today. In Proverbs, God's voice is a woman's voice: Sofia – Wisdom – personified.

This morning, God, through the voice of Woman Wisdom, is acting rather strangely; she is standing at the street corners and at the gates (interestingly, where both prophets *and* prostitutes stand), calling out for anyone and everyone to listen to her, to heed her voice:

“Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
'To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live!”

So here's God, personified through Woman Wisdom – through Sofia – calling out for people to follow her. But what, exactly, does she want us to follow? What is she calling out for us to know? Let's listen to her again:

“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,
when there were no springs abounding with water....
When [God] established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep...
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.”

Here we see that Wisdom was present way back when God created the world; when God forms everything that lives and breathes, Wisdom is instrumental in ordering the Cosmos.

But that’s not all. As we hear these words, this poetry of God’s, I am struck with the *joy* that Wisdom feels as God creates the world. Did you get that? “Then I was beside [God], like a master worker... rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the human race.” Sheer joy. That’s what Wisdom knows as she stands beside God in the creation of the Cosmos. Joy. Gladness. Delight. Delight in the world; delight in us; delight in all that is.

I don’t know where we ever got the idea that this world – what’s out there – is *bad*. I don’t know where we ever learned that the world is a place to escape from, a place that is full of corruption and evil, a place that is not our home. Sure, there’s bad stuff out there, but I wonder sometimes if we’ve gone too far in creating this dichotomy between so-called “worldly” things and “heavenly” things, between that which is “secular” and that which is “spiritual”. Especially after reading this poetry from Proverbs, I’m not so sure that that’s how God wants us to see things. It’s certainly not what Wisdom speaks to us here today.

Wisdom, right beside God from the beginning, does not despise this world; she does not turn up her nose at it, does not call it corrupt or evil or bad. To the contrary, she *delights* in the world, and all that is in it. I imagine her like a child, standing by a creek, mesmerized by a passing dragon fly, by the sound of the water, by the vast sky.

This world really is a beautiful place. We don’t have to fix it, or flee from it, or regard it with suspicion. The world is beautiful! And when God saves us, God does not deliver us *from* the world, but saves us *within* it. Just as we pray every Sunday, God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

This world really is a beautiful place.

And Wisdom awaits us in the world.

It's a question that drives the Book of Proverbs: If we want to be wise, where should we go? If we want to find Wisdom, where should we look?

I think a lot of us would say: "church!" We gather as a church to hear the scriptures, to listen to preaching and teaching, to pray together. And that's all great, but this is not the only place where holiness and beauty happen. According to Proverbs, God is present not only when we gather as a church (whether that be virtually or in person!) but God is also present *out there*, in the public places, on the street corners, where the prophets cry out for justice and where the prostitutes ply their trade. Wisdom resides in our families and in our workplaces, in palaces and in prisons, in hospitals and hospices, in the highways and the hedges...

Do you live, and work and play in this world? Then I've got good news for you this morning: Wisdom awaits you out there, out there in the world. And yes, this even includes phone calls, letters, Zoom and Skype meetings! You think I'm the only one with a holy calling, being called to serve the church? Think again. God's world is outside the church building. And *you* are called there. You are called to the world, which is *good*. You are called to world in which God, Wisdom, delights. If you live in the world, you live where God is.

We don't come to church to get Wisdom; we come to church to get ready to meet her – to meet her *out there* – in all the places she resides.

Thanks be to God!