

# WISDOM

a sermon by

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*Text: "Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it." (Proverbs 8:33)*

It is an all too unfortunate statement of truth – the people most in need of wisdom rarely know that they do not possess it.

All too often, people are inclined to think much too much of themselves. We have all seen this malady in others. You know them; the people who are convinced that they, and they alone, are the smartest, most capable, most intriguing, most fascinating individual in any conversation. But, knowing such people is also to know that they are rarely correct in their self assessment.

Sometimes a conversation can be a bit of fun. Poking a bit of fun about that fact, at times, is a great deal of fun. Such a story has been told of Horace Greely, the great nineteenth century journalist and politician who served briefly in the United States Congress. "In the course of conversations one day, another congressman boasted that he was a self-made man. 'That, sir,' replied Greely, 'relieves the Almighty of a great responsibility.'"<sup>1</sup>

Yes, it is an unfortunate statement of truth – the people most in need of wisdom rarely know that they do not possess it.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifton Fadiman, ed. *The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1985) page 255.

## I.

This really raises the question for each of us: what is true wisdom; and, where does it come from? The questions of wisdom and its source are not new. Books continue to be written questioning what is, or is not, true wisdom.

Michael Beschloss, the very popular presidential historian, writes of this in his most recent book, Presidential Courage.<sup>2</sup> Beschloss writes of several presidents and of difficult decisions that required real courage – presidential courage – for the right decision to have been made and upheld.

We often think of George Washington for his universal popularity, a man who truly could have chosen to be King. However, during his second term in office, President Washington was besieged by the anger of our nation.

Attempting to avoid war with Great Britain, President Washington dispatched John Jay, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, to negotiate a trade agreement with England. Jay successfully negotiated a treaty that was good, though not perfect. President Washington was reluctant to sign it. However, when Washington was confronted with evidence that a member of his cabinet may have opposed the treaty because of bribes that he received from France, Washington fired that member of his cabinet and promptly signed that treaty with some modifications.

Jay's Treaty was not popular with the American people. There was a rush of anger against President Washington and Chief Justice Jay. Congress threatened the President with impeachment. American citizens could be heard drinking toasts to President Washington's death. Jay was known to joke about the fact that he could ride throughout all 15 of the United States at night, his path being lit continuously by his effigies being burned.

George Washington had dreamed of our nation being ruled by consensus, and not by factions or by political parties. His decision to ratify the treaty with Great Britain may have avoided war, but it came at a great personal cost. George Washington's decision was not popular; however, his actions demonstrated both courage and wisdom.

When we speak of our greatest presidents, we speak not only of George Washington; we speak also of Abraham Lincoln. It is Lincoln who saw this nation through its darkest hour, the years of the Civil War. In the course of his first term in office, President Lincoln was confronted by the problem of the southern states seceding from the Union. In 1862, Lincoln warned that unless they returned to the Union, he would free all slaves by issuing a presidential order. As promised, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. That particular document has undoubtedly changed the course of history for the better. However, in its day, the Emancipation Proclamation was wildly unpopular in the South and also in the North. There was a strong popular opinion opposing the war generally; but even more specifically, opposing any war if it would lead to the freedom of African-American slaves.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Beschloss. Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed America 1789 – 1989. (Simon & Schuster, 2007).

George McClellan, a former general who Lincoln himself had fired, opposed Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864. George McClellan already had broad popular support throughout the northern states. The war itself was not universally popular. There were many who believed that the only term of surrender would be to recognize the authority of the United States Constitution. Many others wanted peace at all costs, even if it meant allowing the Southern states to secede and allowing the institution of slavery to continue.

Abraham Lincoln stood strong against this wave of popular opposition. He was berated in the press and opposed in Congress. However, history has proven that Abraham Lincoln was right. His Emancipation Proclamation was not popular. However, his actions demonstrated both courage and wisdom.

## II.

Both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln demonstrated an uncommon sense of wisdom. Again, the questions must be asked for each one of us – what is true wisdom; and, where does it come from? This quest for the source of wisdom is not new. As long as there have been human beings, we have sought wisdom; at times to our own undoing. You know this all too familiar story:

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. The man and his wife hid themselves in the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.”<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, when we are most in danger of making the most unwise decisions, we are blinded to our own error. From the very beginning of time, our quest for wisdom has compelled us to look within ourselves. We confuse wisdom with popularity; and, so we are easily led astray when we believe wisdom is nothing more than agreement with the vast majority of others.

Throughout the generations, the people of God have sought out a divinely inspired source of wisdom. This ancient quest for Godly wisdom is revealed for us in some of the Old Testament literature. The Book of Proverbs as an ancient writing has been analyzed for centuries. Modern-day writers will tell you that the book, as it appears in our Bible, is a collection of several writings from different eras of history. There are some who speculate that the Book of Proverbs includes four<sup>4</sup> different groups of writings; others suggest eight.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:6-8, RSV.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. The New Oxford Annotated Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, 1973), page 769, ff.

<sup>5</sup> See Leo G. Purdue's Proverbs (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000).

What remains undisputed about the Book of Proverbs is that it has proven to be a source of wisdom, Godly and divinely-inspired wisdom. The Book of Proverbs has endured throughout and benefited countless generations.

History and archaeological evidence suggests that the writings of Proverbs were known in the time and in the community of Jesus himself. "Proverbs was an important book in [*ancient*] Israel for training in wisdom, prudence, and moral character, and Qumran made use of it." The Dead Sea Scrolls include scraps from at least two scrolls of Proverbs.<sup>6</sup>

There are many legends about the book of Proverbs. These legends, as inspiring as they may be, pale to the historic reality of these writings. As we read these proverbs today, we read words and receive lessons that have withstood the test of time.

Today's Old Testament lesson is found in a group of writings that are attributed to Solomon. As a general rule, scholars reject the idea that Solomon himself wrote the first nine chapters of Proverbs. However, there is no doubt that the mere mention of Solomon's name harkens to a tradition of Godly wisdom. Solomon, more so than any other ancient king of Israel, was revered for his sense of wisdom.

Early in his reign, Solomon devised creative solutions to extraordinarily difficult problems. He was confronted by two prostitutes.<sup>7</sup> Each woman claimed to be the parent of a particular child, both saying that the child of the other woman had died. Solomon's solution was to issue a terrible order, "Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other."

You remember how this story ends. One woman cried out, begging for the child's life to be spared; while the other woman said, "Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!"

"Then the king gave his ruling: 'Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother.' When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice."<sup>8</sup>

Within the book of Proverbs, the mere mention of Solomon's name harkens back to every story of his wisdom; his every decree, insight, his every God-given gift of direction.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint & Eugene Ulrich, trans. The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), page 594.

<sup>7</sup> First Kings 3:17, ff.

<sup>8</sup> First Kings 3:27-28, NIV.

### III.

The eighth chapter of Proverbs is an ancient poem. The poet begins with an invitation intended to draw the reader into the words.

“Does not wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, in the paths she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud: ‘To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the sons of men.’”<sup>9</sup>

As the reader is drawn into the lesson, there are a variety of lessons to be learned. Perhaps none are more important than these: 1) Wisdom, true wisdom, is rightly understood as the domain of God; and, 2) there are blessings for those who are able to keep the ways of wisdom.

We do well to remember that wisdom, true wisdom, is the domain of God. This is what it means when we read, “the Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old” (Proverbs 8:22).

The words of this verse, as they are read in English, sound remarkably similar to the creation account that we read in the first chapter of Genesis. However, these similarities do not appear in the language of the ancient Hebrew texts. Wisdom is associated with the sacred name of the divine. In the Hebrew language, then as now, the most holy name of God (יהוה) is not spoken; but, instead it is spoken of as being “the sacred name of the divine.” Translators often insert the word Yahweh for this name of God. While there are technical distinctions, that if explained would lull you into a deep sleep, let it suffice to say that there are different names for God in Hebrew, just as there are in English. English translators of the Bible have not paid careful attention to the subtleties of that name; and so it is difficult to capture the very subtle distinctions that are found in very famous poems.

When in the Book of Proverbs we read of wisdom, we learn wisdom is the domain of God. A more literal and less poetic translation of these words would read, “the Lord possessed me at the beginning of his way.” We can scarcely begin to imagine the road traveled by our God. But regardless of that journey, and even before it began, our God possessed and was accompanied by wisdom. Wisdom is nothing less than the domain of God. Wisdom is as old as the divine journey of our God.

Wisdom, true wisdom, is rightly understood as the domain God; and, there are blessings for those who are able to keep the ways of wisdom. In a very curious, but important, subtlety of the ancient texts, the blessings associated with wisdom are not limited to those who possess the wisdom. When reading a Bible, we find a very poetic phrase “happy are those who keep my ways.” Wisdom, as the domain of God, is inseparable from the road that our God travels. Now, in a poetic parallel, we read “blessed (or happy) are y’all who protect my road.”

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<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 8:1-4, RSV.

Here is where we manage to get ourselves into trouble. We want to possess wisdom. We think that there will be blessings in store for us when we are able to control wisdom; or, perhaps to dispense it much in the same manner that a pharmacist might dispense life-saving medication.

However, that is not at all what we read in Proverbs. The blessings that “happiness” is reserved for are for those who protect the journey of wisdom. Wisdom is the domain of God; possessed by God even before the creation of time. When we seek to possess wisdom, we can never grasp hold of it. Perhaps this is why it can be rightly said, “For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”<sup>10</sup>

To our way of thinking, wisdom is completely unpredictable.

George Washington was harshly criticized when he passed by an opportunity to enter into a war with Great Britain, a war people said that they wanted. Then, less than 100 years later, Abraham Lincoln was harshly criticized because he refused to end a war that was wildly unpopular.

Both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln served as president of the United States. They held the same office and, at least in political theory, they led the same people. Both were criticized harshly when they were unable or unwilling to give only what the people demanded.

The critics of every American president believe that they possess more wisdom than the president himself. Some of these critics – maybe even most of them – may have been correct. But in demanding anyone’s possession of wisdom, the critics have strayed from the blessings that wisdom can offer.

Each one of us is guilty of offering that critique in one way or another. We celebrate decisions at every level with which we are in agreement. We question decisions in every context that differ in any way from our own personal opinion.

And so, to our way of thinking, wisdom is unpredictable. When I say that wisdom is unpredictable, I am saying that it is something that we cannot possess or control. However, we can – we must – protect the way of wisdom.

Protecting the way of wisdom requires a different way of thinking, a different model for our actions. British poet, Richard Baxter is credited with these words, words that describe correctly, what is being demanded from each one of us:

“My Lord, I have nothing to do in this World, but to seek and serve thee; I have nothing to do with a Heart and its affections, but to breathe after thee. I have nothing to do with my *Tongue* and *Pen*, but to speak to thee, and for thee, and to publish thy Glory and thy Will.”

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Pope (British poet, 1688–1744) “Essay on Criticism” in Poetical Works (Herbert Davis, ed.; Oxford University Press 1978, 1990).