

B Lectionary 24 9.15.24
Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38
Focus Statement: Jesus pulls us forward

Well, there was a debate on Tuesday night. Travis and I watched it, and like the vast majority of what passes for political speech in our current political climate, I left with the feeling, “well, that’s two hours of my life I can never have back.” I have no interest in spending my precious ten minutes of sermon time wading into a conversation about whatever Tuesday night was and who did or did not quote-unquote “win.” But I will say, two voices being raised on network television, what could be counted as at least one version of a modern public square, does give us a pretty natural invitation to talk about wisdom literature.

Fun Bible fact for you. We think of the bible as a single book, but it is really a compilation of sixty-six individual books written at various times by various authors and in various styles and genres. The bible contains everything from song lyrics to letters to history. We’re spending a few weeks immersed in a genre known as wisdom literature. The purpose of which is to teach readers how to live a good and godly life. This week and next week we’re reading from Proverbs, which is a collection of sayings that, this is Proverbs chapter one verses two and three, are meant “for learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, [and] for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity.”

At this point, rather than trying to paraphrase her words, I just want to read to you from a commentary I read this week from Megan Fullerton Strollo, the Assistant Professor of

Biblical Languages at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. The first part is just straight kind of boring but helpful history. Strollo writes: “The book of Proverbs reached its final form as an anthology of smaller collections of instructional material in the postexilic period, likely the 6th–5th centuries BCE. The middle sections included in chapters 10–30 are likely older and derive from various dates and settings, whereas chapters 1–9 and 31 were composed as frames for the whole book during the postexilic period.”

So, there you go, time frame. Our reading today is from the postexilic period, when the Jewish people returned to Israel following the Babylonian exile, rebuilt the Temple, and began to reestablish themselves and reexplore what it meant to be the people of God. Fun, cool, why are you sharing this with us Pastor Kjersten, other than you are a big history nerd, why do we care? Well, wait for it. Because Professor Strollo goes on: “At this time, the community’s foundations of kingship and temple had been destroyed; questions of identity and how to rebuild or reclaim that community were prominent.

There were divisions regarding the religious practices and theological convictions of God’s people. Some held tightly to the idea of rebuilding the temple and focused on exclusivity as a means of preserving the community. Others clung to the idea of kingship and developed the hope for a new king who would rescue the people from their imperial subjugation. Still others sought to frame community around sets of instructions that were dependent on morality and obedience—this is the primary goal of wisdom literature.”

The postexilic period was after 538 BCE, so some twenty-five hundred years ago, but I share this because when I read Professor Strollo's description I thought, well now, that sounds unfortunately familiar. Community foundations destroyed—or at least shaken and questioned, questions of identity and how to rebuild or reclaim community, divisions regarding who is in and who is out, some focused on exclusivity, others on hope for a leader to rescue and restore them, others trying to frame community on a fixed set of moral values. I don't know about you, but that kind of sounds like today. Maybe this ancient wisdom still has something to teach us.

Today's reading is a speech by Wisdom, personified as a woman crying out in the style of a street corner preacher. By speaking so publicly, Wisdom makes the claim that God is not confined to the world of the religious, but is at the heart of all human activity.

Wisdom announces the presence of God, and Wisdom does not mince words. "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?" Here Wisdom defines three different types of fools. The "simple" are those who, like an ostrich burrowing its head in the sand or a small child covering its ears, "na na na, I can't hear you," refuse wisdom and choose to remain ignorant. Scoffers, this one hit a bit close to home, are the arrogant and cynical, who hear wisdom and mock its efficacy. And fools are those who hear wisdom, who know wisdom, and who refuse to act wisely, refuse to follow its suggestions. Who maybe even use wisdom to advance their own selfish gains. And the cost of not listening to wisdom and continuing to be fools is high.

Says Wisdom, "because I have called and you refused... I also will laugh at your calamity; I

will mock when panic strikes you... when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer." So if we refuse to seek wisdom, even if we change, she will laugh at us? Wisdom sounds more like a bully than the divine voice of God.

There's also the question of what constitutes wisdom. There are a lot of voices proclaiming in the public square these days, claiming to speak wisdom, truth, even divine knowledge. How are we to distinguish wisdom from fools?

Peter, believe it or not, in our Gospel for this morning, was asking a version of the same question. We came into the reading with Jesus asking the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" To paraphrase, what's being said about me in the public square? Or even, how is my Wikipedia page defining me? And the disciples rattle off the expected answers, "John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets." Jesus pushes further, "who do you say that I am?" And Peter nails it, "You are the Messiah!" And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." Wait, what? What about wisdom proclaiming in the public square?! Shouldn't Peter be telling everyone! Except, as we see, while Peter got the title right, he had no idea what those words meant. Because when Jesus went on to teach them about what it meant that he was the Messiah, that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again," Peter was like, oh hard no. No, no, this is not the way to power, this is not how we save our society. You can't suffer and die, Jesus. That's not what the Messiah does! To which Jesus turned right back around and rebuked Peter, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." You are setting your mind

not on divine things but on human things. Your imagination is too small, Jesus said to Peter. Your concept of who I am, of who God is, is too constrained, too constraining. I, my Father, the Holy Spirit who blows through this world, is always bigger than our human understanding, just beyond our comprehension, outside of any box we may try to put God in. So, Jesus went on, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

Deny yourself, leave yourself behind, take up your cross, and follow Jesus. This is a call to motion, to action, to growth. To let Jesus pull us beyond what we thought we knew into new ways of being, living, and acting in the world. Wisdom, then, dear people of God, is, I think, not knowledge or certainty, it is curiosity. It is questioning, pondering, asking questions and constantly seeking and searching for answers. Proverbs one, seven reads, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." And fear in the Old Testament, remember, is not fear like terror, unease, or worry. Fear is awe, wonder, amazement at the way God is acting in our world, drawing us forward into a new and better future. When we follow Jesus, when we let go of the conviction that there is one right answer and instead let Jesus pull us into a world of possibility, then we find ourselves teetering on the uncertain grounds of growth, standing at the base of all that could be. Wisdom turns out to be wonder at all we do not yet know, all God is still revealing to us, and amazement at all the glorious works that God is about to do.

Dear people of God, in this election season, in this time of discerning who we will vest with power at every level from the President and the Senate to the mayor, seats on city and

county commissions, and even the Water Resource Commissioner, I wish Wisdom presented us with certainty of direction. I wish we could know with clarity who is right and wrong and how to determine fixed answers. But, alas, dear people, this both is and is not the most important election of our time. Is and is not because elections matter. All elections matter, not just the presidential, and not just this particular presidential. Honestly, who the president is is super important, but the water resource commissioner is just as important in our tiny corner of the world. And his or her decisions reviewing the maintenance of storm drains may have more immediate impact on our day to day lives. My only solid political advice for you is vote the whole ballot, not just the top race, because all of it matters.

Vote the whole ballot and stay curious. Curious about solutions to complex problems, curious about possibilities for a better future, curious about the role God could be calling you to play in bringing about that potential future. Listen to all voices, not just the loudest or those you already agree with. Listen, and leave yourself open to be changed, grown, drawn forward into new ways of understanding. Wisdom, dear people, is found in a God who is always beyond our understanding, and who is constantly drawing us forward deeper in love with God and with this world God so dearly loves. Thanks be to God. Amen.