

**June 12, 2022**  
**"Wisdom's Call"**  
**Psalms 8 / Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

It is well understood, when it comes to wisdom, that if you claim to be wise, you are not. The moment you claim to be wise, you prove yourself unwise. The Jewish scribe and sage, Ben Sira, suggested that "In seeking wisdom, thou art wise; in imagining that thou hast attained it, thou art a fool."

And the Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, further suggested that "The doorstep to the temple of wisdom is a knowledge of our own ignorance."

So let me say, as I attempt to preach about wisdom this morning, that I make no such claim. I do not claim to be wise about wisdom. Instead, out of my own fully acknowledged ignorance, I hope to let wisdom speak for itself – or rather, speak for HERSELF, as so beautifully described in our reading from Proverbs.

Within the long, oppressive arc of patriarchy, we know well the age-old archetype of the "wise old man," the sage, the guru, the mythological wizard or Jedi, even, within fantasy literature; think Merlin, Gandolf, Ben Kenobi, Yoda. The singular source of wisdom and sound judgment to whom one must go in order to obtain wisdom.

And within the long, oppressive arc of racism is the more specific archetype of an old WHITE guy, often with a beard, often a hermit sitting lotus-style on top of some remote mountain, or in some remote location, ready to dispense pearls of wisdom to those who would make the trek.

It's an archetype Carl Jung referred to as "senex" – the Latin word for old man, and the term from which we get the title, senator. If only, IF ONLY, wisdom was a common trait among Senators. Amen!

That tired archetype, of course, has practically and tragically played out across the board – from white men elevating themselves in social, political and economic circles as those who know best and deserve most, to God, envisioned and portrayed as an old

white guy, and yes, with a beard, somewhere up there, out there, far from here. Such limited theological imagination boxes in a divine presence that is inherently mysterious and ultimately beyond our knowing.

And let's be honest, this pervasive male image of God, historically emphasized to the virtual exclusion of any other images, is the mistaken legacy of mostly old, white, male theologians. But we might take heart in the poetic advice of architect, mathematician and poet, Piet Hein, that the "road to wisdom" is to "err and err and err again / But less and less and less."

Here's to learning from ours and others' mistakes. Authentic spirituality resists dogmatism. Theology is fluid. God is still speaking.

So onto Proverbs then, among the Bible's wisdom literature. And onto this, frankly, refreshing description found in Proverbs, and in Apocryphal books like Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, of Wisdom personified as a woman.

Lady Wisdom – *chokmah* in Hebrew, *sophia* in Greek. A powerful and intimate expression and embodiment of Divine presence and activity in the world. The Divine feminine present from the very beginning – as Sarah just read for us, created "at the beginning of God's work, the first of God's acts of long ago ... before the beginning of the earth."

This poetic portrayal of Wisdom very much resonates with the concept of "Logos," the Word, described in the first chapter of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And it also resonates with John's description of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost as we celebrated last week, as the "Spirit of truth" and the One "who will guide you into all the truth."

Wisdom personified as a woman is a manifestation of Divine presence and activity that invites us, continually, to broaden and deepen our understanding of God and who God is and the ways God works in the world. That invites us into deeper, more intimate relationship with God.

Some of you are familiar with the efforts of many within Christian and other faith traditions who have worked for decades to unearth different images and names for the Divine – including, I'm proud to say, former pastors here at Calvary who were very much on the forefront of that movement. Those who have worked to lift up images of the Divine feminine in the context of exclusively male images of God. And who have been met, as you can well imagine, by strong resistance.

But we stand on their shoulders, celebrating both an inclusive and expansive understanding of God, of the Divine within and beyond each of us. The God who resists our attempts to box God in.

That's why we have long been committed at Calvary to the use of inclusive and sometimes expansive language for God in worship, to avoid narrowing our shared view of God. To avoid putting false limits on the Divine Mystery.

As trail-blazing feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson wrote in her classic book, *She Who Is*, almost 30 years ago now, "No language about God will ever be fully adequate to the burning mystery which it signifies. But a more inclusive way of speaking can come about that bears the ancient wisdom with a new justice."

The archetype of the wise old man has been damaging enough, but so, I think, is the related implication that wisdom is somehow remote. Inaccessible. Available only to a learned few, or only with age. That's not to say that wisdom comes quickly or easily, that it doesn't require lived experience and learning.

But it does come, as Proverbs also reminds us again and again if you read through all 31 chapters, it does come to those who earnestly and humbly seek it. Who seek HER, even above and before all else. Wisdom is MOST important. The foundation.

Proverbs 24:3: "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established ..."

Or as the book of Sirach also says, "Come to Wisdom with all your soul, and keep her ways with all your might. Search out and seek, and she will become known to you, and

when you get hold of her, do not let her go. For at last you will find the rest she gives, and she will be changed into joy for you.”

And to be clear, if we are to believe and take to heart our reading this morning, Wisdom is not hiding! SHE is not hiding. She is not shy.

“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.’”

And earlier in Proverbs we hear, “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks ...”

Wisdom, in fact, is found in the very places where she’s needed most – on the heights, on the street, at the crossroads, on the busiest corners. Picture her with a megaphone, not alone on some remote mountain but among the crowds, leading the resistance, the revolution.

The Divine Wisdom is ours, offering life to all of us who live, if only we will humbly seek her, open ourselves to her. If only we will slow down enough to listen and love. To pay attention. To acknowledge our own ignorance and limitation. To acknowledge mistakes and missteps. To risk honest, thoughtful questions of ourselves and each other. To seek our own and each other’s good, not just with our heads but with our hearts, from which –Proverbs also reminds us – “flow the springs of life.”

To dig deeper, beyond our tendency toward reactionary, superficial engagement with the people and the world around us. Beyond our tendency to build walls instead of bridges.

“A questioning (man)” – a questioning person – “is halfway to being wise,” says the Irish proverb. **So honor the questions.**

“A wise man” – a wise person – “hears one word and understands two,” says the Jewish proverb. **So practice deep listening.**

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom,” says the Greek proverb. **So nurture curiosity instead of anxiety or judgment.**

“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name,” says the Chinese proverb. **So risk truth-telling.**

And as the writer and philosopher, William Hazlitt, once wrote that “The seat of knowledge is in the head; of wisdom, in the heart. We are sure to judge wrong if we do not feel right.” We are sure to judge wrong if we do not feel right.

“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.” That’s Proverbs 4:7. And if you do, when you do, as it says elsewhere, “then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.”

With Wisdom as our guide, with HER Divine call ever before us as it has been since the beginning, may it be so in our own lives. May it be so in our congregation. May it be so in our educational and religious and social institutions. May it be so in the very halls of political power. If only, God hear our prayer.

May it be so.