

Unexpected Wisdom©

Proverbs 8:1-11; 22-36; 1 Cor. 1:18-25

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Today I want to introduce to you a wise woman named *Sophia!*

“She’s taken her stand at First and Main,
at the busiest intersection.

Right in the city square

where the traffic is thickest, she shouts,

“You—I’m talking to all of you,
everyone out here on the streets! ...

Don’t miss a word of this—I’m telling you how to live well,
I’m telling you how to live at your best.” (The Message)

In the Greek language that word for wisdom – translates into *Sophia*. It fits well with this persona that is described as a female – the Wise Woman, which is in contrast to the strange woman – the Seductress – in the chapter before this one.

The Seductress, of course, lures in those who would be weak and who allow themselves to be enticed. They refuse to follow the wise and instead take the road of foolishness, or folly.

Eugene Peterson’s translation from The Message says that woman (the Seductress) ...

“...runs a halfway house to hell,
fits you out with a shroud and a coffin.”

In other words, following someone like that is very unwise. It leads to death and destruction.

Listening to Sophia, however – the one who has wise words, who leads to roads of righteousness and right living – promises to give life abundantly.

Eugene Peterson writes, in the introduction to The Message translation of Proverbs that many people think the Bible has to do with getting people into heaven, with saving souls, with getting right with God. And that is all true!

But, as we read Proverbs, we know that the Scriptures are equally concerned with how we live right here on earth; with having a long, good life, with living in robust sanity.

Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, (which we will read in the next few weeks) are called “Wisdom Literature.” Wisdom is the Bible’s term for “on earth, as it is in heaven;” every day living.

It speaks to the art of living skillfully in whatever conditions we find ourselves. Proverbs purpose is to help people become wise and godly.

The Hebrew title of this book is *mis' le selomah* which translates as "Proverbs of Solomon." That title is traditional and it gives honor to Solomon, but it does not mean that King Solomon was the author of all these pithy sayings. Like the psalms are ascribed to David, yet has many authors, so scholars believe it is also with the Proverbs of Solomon.

Although scholars believe that Solomon wrote over 3,000 of these kinds of sayings for the purpose of teaching, he probably did not write all the teachings we find in the Proverbs.

Like the Psalms, Proverbs are written in short phrases that usually show a contrast. For instance, in verses 35 and 36, we hear:

³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favor from the Lord;
³⁶ but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death.'

We see the contrast from the strange woman of foolishness – the seductress of Chapter 7 and the Sophia – the Wise Woman of Chapter 8.

(We also have to be able to put aside our contemporary feelings about how the ancient people used female imagery for giving examples – both ugly ones and beautiful ones.)

So we see the contrast of Proverbs – choosing folly (or foolishness) leads to destruction, while choosing wisdom – the way of the righteous – leads to a good, happy, fulfilled life.

That doesn't mean you will automatically be rich and wealthy, or never have any illness or worries, but it is the kind of life that, in spite of those things that come our way, we still have peace and joy.

But let's consider the rest of our readings today – both in those last verses of Proverbs, and in the gospel reading from John, as well as the letter Paul writes to the Corinthians.

We hear, beginning in verse 22 of Proverbs these words:

²² "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth."

And then we compare with the words John wrote in chapter 1: “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.”

They sound similar, don't they? The author of Proverbs 8, who is writing about wisdom, claims to have existed before anything else was created. And John claims that this Word made flesh – Jesus – existed in the beginning and that nothing was created without him.

So is this Wisdom the Old Testaments name for what is, in the New Testament, Jesus the Christ? Is the Word also the Wisdom?

Proverbs 8 has been the focus of many theological discussions by scholars throughout time, trying to decide if that is the case. Or is Sophia the third part of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Many feminist theologians have claimed that may be the case.

Elizabeth Johnson, a feminist theologian writes that “Sophia is Israel's God in female imagery.”

Whatever is the case, it does seem that the wisdom of Proverbs and of the Bible is certainly very much a part of the attributes of God, the creator of all.

And so we look closer at the wisdom of God. Paul writes about it to the church in Corinth. He had been informed that some of the members of the Corinthian Church were choosing to follow the ways of that strange woman we first talked about – the one from the previous chapter in Proverbs. In other words they were choosing immorality – the slippery slope that led to destruction.

Paul describes wisdom to this early church – not the wisdom of the world but wisdom that is the character of God, which looks entirely different than many people think it should look.

Paul talks about God's wisdom in the cross. Here is Christ Crucified, hanging dead on a cross. The wisdom of the world would say “He's gone. No more Jesus. Guess he wasn't who we hoped he was.”

Paul says the wisdom of the cross is folly – is foolishness – to all who are perishing, to those who are choosing the way – the path – that leads away from God.

But, to those who choose God's way – the cross means power and wisdom. We hear that term – “the way” used a few times in this 8th chapter of Proverbs.

“On the heights, beside the way ...” (verse 2)

“Happy are those who keep my ways ...” (verse 32)

And Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14:6)

Choose Wisdom – choose Christ – choose Life!

On the cross those who choose the world’s wisdom see defeat, and hopelessness, and death.

But those who choose to have their ears open and their hearts pliable to the wisdom of God, look at the cross and see compassion and mercy, forgiveness and transformation. They see life – new and joyful and eternal.

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:25)

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