

**SOUL SONGS: A Soul Song of Wisdom
(Like a tree planted in Eden)**

Psalm 1; Philippians 3:7-16; Matthew 7:24-27

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana

September 11, 2021 The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

NOWHERE LAND: OFF THE GRID

Not long ago I was out in the desert southwest. I was nowhere. I was so far into nowhere that there was no cell phone coverage. The navigation app I was relying on suddenly went silent...blank. Even the music app I was using began spinning helplessly. I was trying to pull up the old Jerry Butler ballad *For Your Precious Love* and all I got was silence.

It was dark.

No lights in any direction.

I had never been on that highway before. The territory was unfamiliar.

So I kept driving trusting that, at some point, I would reconnect with the world. At some point in the middle of that dark night, I would pick up a signal that would lead me where I needed to be.

PSALM 1: WISDOM

I thought of that middle-of-the-night drive as we come to Psalm 1 today. Because God, we believe and the Bible claims, never leaves us in the dark without any direction, without any answers, without any guidance.

This is the last sermon in our series on the Psalms, *Soul Songs*. It's a wisdom psalm. Wisdom literature in the Bible lifts up, celebrates, the gift of God's truth. Wisdom literature in the Bible can be found in Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and the Psalms. Wisdom, in scripture, is usually referred to as a female.

There are three things we need to know about wisdom. First, wisdom is available wherever we are.

Psalm 139 tells us we can never run so hard and so long that we can get beyond the presence of God. The psalmist, in that beautiful song, promises that even at the farthest limits of the sea the hand of God will lead us, and God's right hand shall hold us fast. Even there, in the darkest, deepest place we can imagine, the thoughts of God -the wisdom and truth of God- are still with us. The thoughts of God, the wisdom of God, are impossible to count: they are like the sand.

There is always the light of the truth of God. Even in the high desert in the middle of a dark night.

Second, wisdom has always been a thing...always a part of the cosmos (from the beginning). It is not a late gift from God to the world but wisdom has existed since the beginning.

The Jewish understanding is that wisdom existed even before creation. In fact, Proverbs explains that creation was God's partner in creation and has never stopped

being God's partner. Proverbs 8 speaks to us in wisdom's voice. It is a beautiful chapter of the Bible!

Wisdom, Proverbs 8 says, calls to us. Wisdom raises -notice the feminine pronoun- her voice. Wisdom stands alongside the road, or stands at the city gate, and calls to us. All those who hear her voice, all those who pay attention, all those who are willing to learn what is true and good and right and beautiful, will live. Wisdom brings intelligence, insight, prudence, knowledge and discretion.

There is nothing twisted or crooked in the words wisdom speaks to us. Wisdom, the writer of Proverbs says, is better than silver or jewels. Wisdom helps us walk in the paths of justice and the way of righteousness.

Verse 22 of chapter 8 of Proverbs says that the first thing God created was wisdom. This happened before the beginning of the earth. When God established the heavens, wisdom says, "I was there."

"When (God) marked out the foundations of the earth," wisdom says in Proverbs 8, "then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was daily his delight."

Whoever finds wisdom, Proverbs says, finds life. All those who miss me, wisdom says to us, "injure themselves."

I need to stop here, and point out how essential to human life, happiness and righteousness is the wisdom of God. Do you remember what I said several months ago in a three-sermon series when we all thought the COVID pandemic was behind us?

When we thought we were coming out of the pandemic, I asked the question: what have we learned? One of the things we have learned, I said, was that truth matters. I said truth matters.

Who would think such a statement would be so necessary? Truth matters.

Truth matters in the cockpit of an airplane: the instruments need to be true.

Truth matters in the hallways of government: lies and conspiracies can wreck a nation.

Truth matters in the media: lies told by some stranger on the other side of the world don't make a story true.

Truth matters in medicine: the vaccine saves lives and deworming medication isn't going to help against COVID-19 despite what some tv personality may say.

Truth matters when it comes to the way of Jesus. The other day I was behind a pickup truck that had a decal on the back window. The decal was the outline of an AR-15 with a Christian cross where the site of the weapon should be: truth matters when it comes to Jesus and Jesus is the Prince of Peace and not an attachment on a weapon of death.

Truth matters.

Wisdom is and has always been God's gift to us. God never leaves us in the high desert on a dark night with no connection...no guidance...no truth. There is always the light of truth there. There is always the light of wisdom there. Even when the music app is spinning silently as we're trying to hear Jerry Butler sing *For Your Precious Love* or the Righteous Brothers sing *Unchained Melody* or Patsy Cline sing "Crazy." Wisdom is always there. There is always that light in the darkness: what is true and leads to life.

There is a third thing about wisdom: it is not just limited to the pages of the Bible or our own religious tradition but God's wisdom is revealed beyond our holy texts and faith tradition. Which is a wonderful thing to know! It is also a helpful antidote to religious pride: people beyond our faith tribe can know wisdom because God speaks not only through our traditions and texts but beyond them.

The Jews understood wisdom to be loose in the world outside the religious texts, outside the Torah and outside the Law. So they believed we should be paying attention not only to the Bible but what is happening in the world, the art that is being created, the books and plays and poems being written today and the discoveries of science today.

One Jewish writer talks about "practical wisdom."

This is a breath-taking claim and it is a good thing for people inside the church to remember: God speaks wisdom into the world not only through our holy texts but outside the church and beyond our holy texts.

Wisdom comes to us, then, not only through the Bible and not only through the teachings and life of Jesus but wisdom calls to us from literature and science and modern-day events.

I've never forgotten that a friend of mine, who had been baptized in the water of the Ohio River, really began to understand grace and his need of grace when he went to see a performance of "Les Mis." He had read the New Testament gospels. He knew the story of Jesus. But it was in the darkened auditorium on the campus of Butler University, as he watched the story of Jean Valjean being told on the stage, that grace became real to him. Wisdom found him. The the light of truth find him in his own high desert darkness.

You know this. Many of us in this room know this. We made a connection, we saw something we had been missing, as we stood in a science lab or watched a film or read a biography or hiked the Pacific Coast Trail.

A friend told me recently that Tom Petty's song "Time to Move On" was the wisdom he needed to hear at a tough, stuck chapter in his life:

*It's time to move on, time to get going
What lies ahead, I have no way of knowing
But under my feet, baby, grass is growing
It's time to move on, it's time to get going*

Wisdom finds us.

Truth can come to us from all sorts of angles.

All of this, of course, brings us to the sermon and Psalm 1.

You'll always find a crowd on the highway of foolishness, the psalmist seems to suggest as he refers to the path sinners tread. When he is talking about the wicked, the writer of the psalm refers to "sinners" and "scoffers" in the plural.

There is a crowd willing to believe foolishness.

There is a crowd willing to believe what is wrong is true.

The happy person, the psalmist says, is the person who doesn't go along with the crowd. The happy person is the person who doesn't follow the advice of the wicked "or take the path that sinners tread."

If you want to know Jesus, you might start by reading the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. (In the Gospel of Luke, this sermon is referred to as “the Sermon on the Plain.”) You’ll find the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew’s Gospel.

Jesus, in the 7th chapter, is telling us not to judge. Which really is a threat to one of our favorite all-time hobbies: judging one another. Jesus says we see the speck of wood in the other person’s life while missing the 2 x 4 in our own life.

Then, Jesus says to treat the precious and valuable things -and people- in your life as if they are in fact precious and valuable. Don’t throw them away. Don’t waste them.

Jesus, in 12, tells us in everything to “*do to others as you would have them do to you.*” It’s a basic lesson most of us forget multiple times each day.

If you want to see how difficult this is to live out, park your car at the corner of West 7th Street and Grandstaff Drive someday around 5 in the afternoon. Be an observer. And you’ll see how the “do to others as you would have them do to you” is so easily forgotten. We may want to turn the phrase around so it says “do unto others before they do unto you.”

After all these lessons about how to live in a Kingdom of God way, verse 12 tells us this: “*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it*”

I used to think Jesus was being unnecessarily negative. Now, I have come to see Jesus is simply being descriptive: there is a crowd on the road called selfishness. There is a crowd on the road called greed. There is a crowd on the road called violence. There is a crowd on the road called hate. There is a crowd on the road called selfishness. There is a crowd on the road called ambition. There is a crowd on the road called shame.

When the psalmist refers to “scoffers,” one Bible scholar I read reminded me that the psalmist is referring to those “are arrogantly unwilling to accept instruction.” Which stopped me. I saw again how stubbornly we hold onto the lies we want to believe.

Love is a hard lesson.

Grace, we insist, is too good to be true.

Love is a truth we are too good at resisting.

So the psalmist is saying the wicked form a pretty good size crowd. Jesus says the gate is narrow that leads to life.

Happy are those, the psalmist says, who delight in the law of the LORD.

I used to read this and immediately assume it meant someone who is hyper-focused on knowing the Bible and the religious Law backwards and forwards. No, though, I have come to see that the psalmist is talking about is a posture of openness to God and wisdom. Happy is the person who is open to new truth. Happy is the person who gladly receives the wisdom God has for them.

The other day I was sitting next to a 4 year old named Grant. The 4 year old and I were sitting in the backseat because that is where the 4 year old insists that I sit. The 4 year old had made a mistake. I can’t remember, for the life of me, what it was. (/

sometimes find myself hoping God is as forgetful of my failures as a grandparent is forgetful about the failures of a grandchild.) I explained to the 4 year old that adults make mistakes. I explained that daddys make mistakes. I explained that grandpas made mistakes. And, I said, then we learn. We learn. We see things we have been missing. We understand things we didn't understand before. "We can learn as we go," I said.

Maybe that is what the psalmist is saying. Maybe that is what the psalmist is trying to get us to see. We can learn as we go, and that is a wonderful thing...a beautiful thing about life.

A month ago I was hanging out with my granddaughters, Ella and Olivia. They are 11 and 13, and I love them very much. I was explaining to them one of the great frustrations of my life. I was telling them about something I really wanted to do but had not been able to figure out how to accomplish. "I wish I could spend a whole weekend watching all the 'Star Wars' movies," I said, "but I know they were released out of sequence. And I can't for the life of me figure out in what order they should be seen. Because the first three weren't really the first three, and then there were those prequels."

The room got quiet and they said, "The numbers, Grandpa."

I kept on, "But how do you know which movie to start with?"

Now the room was quiet. The girls and their parents were looking at me with a mixture of shock and puzzlement and pity.'

"Look at the numbers, Grandpa," they said in unison.

"How do you know where to start?" I asked.

"The first movie has the number 'one' at the beginning," they said. "The second movie in the sequence has the number 'two' at the beginning."

"When did they start putting the numbers on the 'Star Wars' movies?" I asked.

The room was quiet.

So now I know.

All those years I didn't know: now, I know!

Happy are those whose lives and minds and hearts are open to the wisdom of God, and how miserable are those who are arrogantly unwilling to accept instruction.

Jesus said, when we build our lives on the truth he shares with us, we are like someone who builds their house on a solid foundation. Everything else is shifting sand.

There is a beautiful moment in the 8th chapter of the Gospel of John. A religious mob has wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery. They bring her to Jesus but Jesus says the one without sin can throw the first stone to begin her execution. No one throws a stone. Jesus draws something in the sand. The writer of John doesn't tell us what it was Jesus drew, but as the crowd sees it the crowd melts away. Jesus asks the woman her accusers her, and she says, "No one is standing here, sir." Jesus sends her away as he says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." It's grace. It's mercy. And the freedom to make a new start. *(By the way, that is why we are calling our 10:45 service "Chapter Two." Everyone needs a second chapter. Everyone is given a chance to make a new start by Jesus.)*

After that moment with the woman and the mob, Jesus says he is the light of the world. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life," he says.

A little later, Jesus says that if we continue in the word of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the truth of Jesus, the love of Jesus, then we will know the truth and the truth will make us free. (John 8:32)

We've been talking about wisdom today. We've been talking about the power of truth today. How God offers us the guidance, the answers, we need to live well and free. Turns out, as John tells us, the truth that finds us in the deep darkness on a high desert road, comes to us in a Carpenter. To accept truth, to be set free by truth, is to accept him. Which is what we can do now: accept the Carpenter as our truth.

Out there, on the high desert in the middle of the darkness, we are never beyond the wisdom of God. The light will find us. But we have to be open.

Wisdom can find you, wherever you are, even when your music app goes silent and your navigation app stops working. Whatever desert road you may be driving.