

“What Is Wisdom?”
Proverbs 1:1-7 and 2:1-15;
Job 28:12-28; Luke 7:31-35

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I’m starting a new sermon series today, and the reason I’m going with this particular series is because as I was working through my Doctor of Ministry material, I came upon what felt to me like limits to knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways and I thought: how do we face tomorrow because there are limits to what we know about tomorrow. Is there something that gives us some perspective? Something that shows us what path to take?

I think that knowledge itself isn’t always enough. We may have all the data. We may be smart. But taking the smarts and data and figuring out how to use them to live—it’s the steps in living that I’m curious about. It seemed to me that the word “wisdom” came up when I began to think about that. What does it mean to be wise? What does “wisdom” mean?

Sometimes I think we have a little struggle with the word “wisdom” partly because of some of the sayings we have heard about wisdom. I’ll give you one of my favorite sayings out of Proverbs. It says in Proverbs 16:31, “Gray hair is the crown of glory. It is gained by righteous life.” Some of you appreciate that verse as well.

That is a passage about wisdom, but that does not in itself make up wisdom, does it? In fact, sometimes it’s because we use these fairly short but engaging ways of saying things that we begin to think wisdom is just a bunch of platitudes. I want to suggest it’s more than that. Even this little saying is really pointing beyond. I don’t think it is to be taken literally. I don’t think having gray hair like mine is really a crown. But I do think that it points us toward thinking about the idea that if somebody has lived a long time, maybe they have some knowledge that’s useful. When this passage was written, it was a very violent time and somebody who had lived a long life must have made some good decisions along the way to make it that far.

So when we begin to think about wisdom, we recognize that wisdom can’t be boiled down to a single statement like this. This statement out of Proverbs has some wisdom to it, but it is not wisdom itself. In fact, we can read all the way through the book of Proverbs and find that we still aren’t necessarily done with wisdom. Wisdom is a fairly deep, and broad, and engaging topic. It is one however that I’m not sure I’ve heard a whole lot of preaching about, partly because there is a little presumptiveness in talking about wisdom. I’m going to say that I can talk about wisdom without being wise. So it’s not like I’m imparting wisdom to you. I’m inviting us to go on this journey together to think about what wisdom is.

If we start with a definition of what wisdom is, let me suggest this as a working definition. Particularly starting with the Hebrew word for wisdom, it seems to mean knowing how to read the ways and the moral structure of the world and live according to them so that one not only copes with life, but lives well and in an upright manner. I’ll go through that again now, and we’ll keep hearing it. It’s a little bit long, but it starts with the ways of the world. The idea that there is a moral structure for the world, and that we

can live according to it so that we not only cope with life but live well and in an upright manner, gives a shape to the idea of wisdom.

If we look at the Proverbs passages for today, it begins to encourage us to think not only of what wisdom means, but to think about its value. It talks about it being like a treasure, something we would search for like we would a treasure, to gather it up. So as we begin to think about wisdom and how it is an incredibly interesting and important thing, we can begin to think about what it deals with—ways of living, moral structure.

In those first verses it says it encompasses righteousness, justice, and equity. Let me just start with those. Righteousness, I would define as right relationships. You've probably heard that before from me. Living in right relationship to one another. Justice, we might define as right dealings with one another, the way we have interchange. Equity, I think, means thinking about how we're all uniquely God's children, that God loves each of us, that we all deserve goodness, grace, and love.

It goes on, then, to talk about being able to deal with those, and perhaps this is another reason we sometimes don't think highly of wisdom. While righteousness, justice, and equity are these big abstract words, what wisdom seems to do is take these words and bring them into normal everyday life. It says it's not just about having those big constructs out there, but it's about how we walk daily with our decisions. How do we actually acquire the skills for living?

So these just begin to identify why wisdom might be important. It's something that we all want to have. We all want to figure out better how to live our lives and to live them well, and perhaps even to do things in an upright manner. So as we begin to think about and wonder about what it means to be wise, how do we gain wisdom?

We have a pattern for gaining knowledge. We can simply learn things and learn about things to gain knowledge. Wisdom seems to go another step. Science is really good at talking about certain aspects of life, but life itself is a hard one for science, along with love, and good, and evil. Wisdom seems to be about these kinds of things. They seem to be almost beyond my understanding. We try to come up with these nice little aphorisms that give us an idea about how life would be better if we just do random acts of kindness or any number of other things. I should have had a list for you; maybe I'll do that another time. The thing is that we know that while we can see these individual things are valuable, putting it all together can be hard. We can also think about worldly wisdom, and then we can think about God's wisdom. How is it that we really know and embrace the wisdom God gives us?

Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, and I think there are some other places in scripture that suggest that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now the hard thing about that is the idea of fear. I don't think that it is talking about abject terror of God, although there might be times where that's appropriate. I don't think that what it's talking about. I was out under the sky a couple of nights ago looking up at the stars and was once again just lying there in wonder at the vastness of the universe, the incredible nature of the world we live in, the complexities of all the interactions, and I realized that a God who could create all this is way beyond my understanding. There's a sense of awe that

is just incredible. There is a God who is beyond all of that. I think that's more what it's getting at—recognizing that God is beyond us.

I think we have a tendency to try to domesticate God and say, "Well God, you should be the good servant here, doing what we need done." Or, "If we were you, we would do this differently." It's almost as if we think we have a better understanding of how everything works than God does. It is those moments of awe that remind me that I don't have any clue how God sees it all. I can hardly even see all the complexities of individual relationships sometimes, let alone multiple people, or nations, or the world. I think about the ecological web and how interrelated things are, and it just begins to get a little overwhelming.

So how do we begin? With an awe of God. If we have that awe, if we have that sense that God is great, God is awesome, God is incredible, then maybe it's worth listening to that One who has much greater insight than we do. That is where I think Biblical wisdom begins. It begins by acknowledging God as creator, and we can go on from there, acknowledging that God has something to teach us.

There is a certain awe that God would even take the time and be willing. And God not only takes the time, he doesn't force it on us, but invites us into it. God encourages us to listen and to hear and to know that there is a way and that God will walk us through life and guide us along the journey. It will be about how we get along and how we deal with one another and how we care about one another. What comes out the other end is how much life that gives us, invites us into.

I don't know about you, but it feels to me like it seems important to try to figure out how to read the ways and moral structure of the world and to learn not only to cope with them but to live well and in an upright manner. So we can begin with something like reading Proverbs to hear how God is speaking in and through these senses of the way the world works and how they begin to fit together and lead us into something bigger and deeper. But the real beginning is with God. Maybe it's sometimes just sitting in awe and wonder, being willing to open the book rather than just acknowledging that it's full of wisdom. I invite you on this journey in thinking about wisdom, beginning with how awesome God is. Amen.