

“Unexpected Wisdom”
1 Kings 10:1-9; Acts 7:17-22;
Proverbs 3:1-4, 28-32; Matthew 12:12-21

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“Wisdom! Come get your wisdom here!”

If you remember, last week we talked about Woman Wisdom calling out in the marketplace. There’s that idea that wisdom is beyond the walls of any particular church or any particular group or any particular doctrine. Wisdom is something broader and it can be found out in the marketplace, out at the gate.

As we listen to some of these stories from the Old Testament, we hear the Queen of Sheba coming to talk to Solomon. We hear about Moses growing up in the Egyptian court and learning the wisdom of the Egyptians. And there’s this idea that wisdom was something that went across these boundaries. The Egyptians had some wisdom. If we go back and listen to the story of Joseph, Joseph came to Egypt and the Pharaoh recognized his wisdom and raised him up as the one to guide the Egyptians in how they did things. So there’s this idea that wisdom has a broad sweep.

So it shouldn’t be too surprising that as we look at the Book of Proverbs, there are pieces of that book that are very similar to Egyptian wisdom literature. The end of Proverbs is very similar to a writing from Egypt in 1100 BC. This stuff goes back some 5,000 years.

Some people think that Ma’at, which is the Egyptian Goddess of Wisdom, is similar to Woman Wisdom. There are some similarities. We probably shouldn’t be too surprised because there was that wisdom that was going back and forth. I’ll talk a little bit about what I think is the uniqueness of Old Testament wisdom, but there is that similarity.

Some people would say we notice some of that ancient Near East wisdom literature because we first noticed it in scripture in books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, which helped us recognize a genre of literature that dealt with what we call wisdom.

So we are talking about wisdom, and again today I wanted to think about the nature of wisdom. I promise we will get beyond just talking about wisdom in the general form, but it is as we think about that quest, it is really a human quest for wisdom that often occurs throughout a society and we think about it in a variety of ways. We’re going to think about it as the desire, the quest for, and the understanding of how we get along together, how things work. There’s a sense of order that people want to find and that order works out. How do we identify that order so that we get along with each other and life is orderly? It’s almost as if things are created that way so you want to figure out how human life works together.

It works out in a number of ways. Wisdom is a quest for understanding human relationships, for explaining how we do the exchange good and services—relationships of give and take. Wisdom also addresses how we deal with the other, somebody who’s not part of our group or the least among us. Wisdom’s reach extends to the question of

how we deal with what seems like unjust suffering, which is something that is difficult to understand.

One way it feels to me like human wisdom frames its understanding is to say “It’s all ordered, so let’s find that order.” Wisdom is about order. Wisdom often, then, would be recognizing that if things got chaotic that the order must have been messed up in some way. So wisdom is finding a way to get out of that chaotic situation and back to a more orderly system. I’ll suggest that there are some problems with that way of thinking—that is, that wisdom is just to get us to be orderly. Probably the most orderly society you could ever be part of is a totalitarian society. I think there are some problems with that.

Order can be beautiful and great, but we need the influence of chaos to make things alive. Think about looking out at the Palouse. It’s the changes in the light and shadow that make it so fascinating. If it were all just the same all the time we wouldn’t notice it. That’s the problem with getting too orderly.

We need order. We need law and order. Laws are the boundary conditions. There’s a lot that goes on before you get to breaking the boundary and it is in that sphere that we need wisdom. The issue that humans have, I think, is that when we try to do wisdom on our own what we try to do is set up a predictable, ordered system. Now, anybody who lives life has got to know that life is not always predictable and orderly. So there’s the issue of how we deal with that. How often do we struggle with the predictable?

We want to have a certain understanding of life. We want to have a way of getting along, yet we need to recognize that there are variations and we have to figure out how to work with those variations. The trouble is there are some human limitations. I think that’s the real problem we run up against. I want to suggest that there are two real human limitations. One is time—we just don’t have the time to learn everything. Even as a group, we can get all this information—and we can find all kinds of information today—but we don’t have the time to see it and learn it all. Secondly, I think there are limits to our vision, to our ability to see, the ability to know, the ability to predict. And yet, we struggle, I think, with wanting to have so much control or to be able to have the wisdom come from within ourselves.

Let me tell two stories that suggest something of the problem we face. One is an old story, and you may have heard it. It’s the story about Daedalus and Icarus, an old myth about a father and a son who are trapped on Crete. Daedalus was pretty inventive so he made wings for the two of them. He told his son, “Don’t fly too close to the ocean and don’t fly too high. The ocean will make the wings wet and you will fall into the water. If you go too high the sun will melt the wax that holds the wings together.”

If you know the story, when Icarus starts flying he doesn’t want to listen any further to his father. He flies high and the sun melts the wax. He falls into the ocean, and it’s the end of Icarus. It’s a story about human hubris. It’s the idea that as we get going in life we can begin to think we know enough that we don’t need to listen to the wisdom that is beyond or outside of us.

The second story is another story about overconfidence. It's a story about a kindergarten or first grade teacher, who was accepting end-of year gifts from the children. The first child came. She knew that the child's parents owned a flower shop, so when the child gave her the gift she said, "Thank you for the flowers." The child said, "How did you know?!" She said, "Oh, I just guessed."

The next child's parents owned a confectionary; they made chocolates. So as the child gave her the gift, she said, "Thank you for the chocolates." The child said, "How'd you know?" The teacher said, "It was just a guess."

The next child's parents owned a liquor store. The child handed her the gift and there was some liquid dripping out. So she took her finger and tasted it and said, "Is it wine?" "No," the child said. She tasted it again. "Is it champagne?" The child proudly announced, "No. It's a puppy!"

Do we ever get overconfident? Is there ever a time in your life where you've felt like, "I've got this figured out," and your confidence led to unexpected outcomes?

We as human beings begin to think we have our own wisdom. But Proverbs tells us "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God." What the Hebrews brought to wisdom was a recognition that we could never know it all on our own. We could never find the way completely on our own. It is the wisdom of God that we need, that we need to be in relationship with. It is those moments of overconfidence, those moments when we think we've got something figured out, that can be some of the more dangerous moments in our lives because we quit listening, quit probing, quit wondering how God might be leading us.

I want to leave you with this question: Where are those places in my life where I might be so confident that I might miss what God is saying? Where is my own sense of "I'm sure this is the way it is," so clear that I no longer allow God to speak into my life in that area?

What I'm saying is that wisdom begins with a reverence for God, which includes our attitude of humility. Humility enables us to listen and to hear, to realize that there is an unexpected wisdom, a wisdom beyond what I already know, a wisdom that comes from God.

I want to leave you with that today, to think about where might unexpected wisdom be in your life. Ask yourself, "Where might I need to look again at something I was so sure of, to let God speak again into that place in my life?"

God is the one who does have the time, does have the vision, does have the clarity that can give us direction. Amen.