



Ravensworth

BAPTIST CHURCH

September 8, 2024 | Ordinary Time
Proverbs 22 | *Word to the Wise: Be Generous!*
Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis, preaching

Every once in a while the lectionary, which is the resource that divides up the Bible into three years of readings, really hands us a gift. And I believe the lectionary has handed us all a gift this fall. As the realities of life in 2024 swirl around us– from back to school to election chaos to another school shooting this week, we must ask how we center ourselves and connect with God. Where do we encounter wisdom, and what is it?

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines Wisdom as “ability to discern inner qualities and relationships, good sense, generally held belief, accumulated philosophical or scientific learning.”

Wisdom comes to us from all over–shout out or share in the comments online– where do you encounter wisdom?

If all of this informs our understanding and experience with wisdom, how might we experience the wisdom in the wisdom literature texts in our Bible?

For nine weeks, beginning today, we’ll encounter the section of the Bible called Wisdom Literature–Proverbs, Esther, Job, Wisdom of Solomon, and we’ll also dabble in the Gospel of Mark to encounter Jesus’ wisdom.

My prayer is that this series and time together in worship will be a touchpoint for us to return to throughout the week and equip us to create practices in our daily lives that both encounter and reveal God’s wisdom to us. Because

Wisdom Literature in the Bible is just that— for daily living and living with all of God’s creation.

As Dr. Amy Plantinga Pauw writes in her commentary on Proverbs, “Wisdom literature looks at the world through a wide-angle lens. It is concerned with the meaning and purpose of human life in general, not within the story of a particular nation or tribe. Wisdom addresses questions that all human beings ask, so it is not surprising that every religious community has wisdom traditions.”¹

For the next three weeks in our series, we will read from the book of Proverbs. Every culture has proverbs and words of daily living and wisdom.

The Book of Proverbs is the heart of wisdom literature in the Bible. “Proverbs shows little interest in issues of worship and cultic purity. There is no ‘Thus says the Lord’ in Proverbs: God never speaks. Proverbs does not mention the ‘mighty acts of God’ on Israel’s behalf. It is concerned not with the acts of divine deliverance for the biblical Israel but an ongoing sustenance for all creaturely life. Instead of calling Israel to separate itself from and reject the ways of its neighbors, Proverbs models a critical acceptance of the insights and teachings of the other nations. What God intends Israel to learn about creaturely life binds them to people from other cultures and religious traditions, making Israel their debtor in her search for wisdom.”²

In our selection for today, Proverbs 22 offers some general thoughts on right living with others within God’s great creation. A good name is more important than silver and gold. And what brings about a good name— the way we live together.

The generous share their bread; they do not rob the poor through schemes or corruption or theft; they do not crush the poor or the afflicted who sit at the gate to the city. The generous do not create tax laws that benefit the wealthy and hurt the everyday person. The generous do not build walls to keep people

¹ Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, Belief Bible Commentary Series, 4-6.

² *Ibid*, 110-111.

out and contained; they open doors and meet people where they are with compassion. The generous do not fight to have AR-15s accessible and 10 commandments in schools when the leading cause of death of children in the United States is gun violence, and Christian nationalism conflates gun rights with following the Prince of Peace.

Lawrence Roberts writes of Proverbs 22, "Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss. If one ignores the class dimension of sexism and racism, one will fail to understand how to unravel these evils most efficiently. To remain silent when seeing anyone being exploited is to be complicit in the marginalization of people."³

The generous are blessed—the spirit of generosity means that the concerns of neighbors are the concerns of the community. There is a richness that comes from the generosity of both tangible and intangible because of that spirit.

It's kinda like how Dolly sang,
*"And oh I could not understand it, for I felt I was rich
And I told them of the love my momma sewed in every stitch."*

In fact, we have a lot of musical wisdom swirling around and within us today. You heard a Dolly Parton song, and you'll see the lyrics from Simon & Garfunkel's classic folk song, "The Sound of Silence." It will probably be stuck in your head this entire series, and I'm not sorry about it. One of the most famous lines in the song is what you find on our walls, as they sang, "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and... tenement halls."

Garfunkel, introducing the song at a live performance (with Simon) in the Netherlands in June 1966, summed up the song's meaning as "the inability of people to communicate with each other, and not particularly internationally

³ Lawrence W. Rodgers, *Wisdom Commentary Series: Proverbs*, 212.

but especially emotionally, so that what you see around you is people who are unable to love each other.”

It would be the generosity of spirit, the proverb of offering bread to one another, which would help us to communicate with each other—especially by listening to one another. What wisdom would we find if we really encountered the wisdom written on the subway walls and tenement halls? I think we would be radically changed people believing that wisdom is present everywhere.

Because the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls, and tenement halls, we’re going to work on a collective art project on our sanctuary walls during this series. Following worship, you’re invited to add your post-it note to our wall.

On your bulletin, you’ll find a post-it note. With that, take a few moments right now to write or to draw **where you’ve encountered wisdom before in your life**. Who shared it with you? Who points you to wisdom? This is a broad exercise that started with our A Time for All Ages today. You could write a word or a sentence or a name, or draw a picture. (So take a few moments and write)

One of my favorite scholars, Dr. Ellen Davis says of Proverbs, “The Book of Proverbs is a spiritual guide on the days when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come for lunch.” Most days are like that.⁴

To me, that quote speaks to the daily wisdom we encounter. We will not have water pouring from rocks and angels joining us at the table most days, but we still have the touchpoint of wisdom and the call to generosity. We have the experience of this life, of songs, of relationships, of the generosity of one another to pull from to center ourselves.

⁴ Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, WBC, 12.

Where do we encounter wisdom?

In Proverbs? I have today!

On the subway walls and tenement halls? Absolutely.

In our community time together when we share stories with each other of how we experience life and God? Definitely.

From other cultures and religious traditions. Yep!

When Dolly Parton speaks to us? You better.

From the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark today, where he realized he was wrong, immediately corrected his behavior, and expanded his message and his welcome? For sure. And we're about to sing about that story.

For God is with us always, when we are generous and when we are not, always ready to point us back towards ourselves and toward the liberating love that surrounds us. May it be so. Amen.