

Sermon Title: The Cry of Wisdom
Text: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5
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Graduate Recognition Sunday
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI

I've been fortunate through most of my ministry to be surrounded by spectacular stained glass in worship. You know all about these wonderful creations of Tom Dietrich that embrace our worship each Sunday, but the congregation I served in Milwaukee had a similar blessing. Built in the early 1900's, the windows there were designed and built by the studios of Tiffany, and as is the case here, the most spectacular view was reserved for those who led worship. At Plymouth, the entire back wall of the sanctuary was filled with a depiction of the voice that spoke to us from Proverbs this morning—the Angel of Wisdom.

It is an amazing work of art, but the thing I always found most interesting about it was the wonderfully astute theology that informed it. You know how much stained glass really is designed to enclose a space...to mark it off from the world around it, and make that which is within its grasp "holy." But in Tiffany's representation Wisdom's orientation was not *in* to the church, but stepping *out* of the sanctuary and into the world. The movement of God's wisdom, the artist seemed to grasp, was not to take some small part of this creation, and make it holy, but for some small part of this creation to step out into the wide world, in order to work its redemption.

Had we read the Psalm for this morning, it would have been Psalm 8, and Stephen Mitchell provides a beautiful adaptation of that Psalm:

*Unnamable God, how measureless
is your power on all the earth
and how radiant the sky!
When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the multitude of stars,
what is man, that you love him,
and woman, that you gladden her heart?
Yet you made us almost like angels
and crowned us with understanding.
You put us in charge of all creatures
and placed your whole earth in our hands:
all animals, tame and wild,
all forests, fields, and deserts,
even the pure air of the sky,
even the depths of the ocean.
Unnamable God, how terrible
is our power on all the earth.¹*

The Psalm, especially in Mitchell's adaptation, pushes us in the same direction as Wisdom's angel: The goodness of God's love in creating us as we are marks us with the immense responsibility that is placed upon us by our unique place in all creation. Understanding entails commitment, which places

¹ Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew*. New York, Harper Collins, 1993. P. 5.

in human hands a wonderful and terrible accountability for all that has been entrusted to us—the whole earth, “even the pure air of the sky, even the depths of the ocean.”

We are in the season of graduation in the world around us, and at least for me one of the things this season lays upon my heart is a sort of taking-stock of the world we are passing on to, or preparing to share with those who are emerging into maturity, ready to work beside us in this awesome task God has set before us, of building lives and worlds.

Graduation at its core is a signal that some set of preparations is completed, some set of skills obtained, and that we are ready in a new way to face the world around us. And it is certainly true for those whom we will name in worship in a few minutes, and are listed in the bulletin. These are people, some young (some not so young!) who have worked hard, accomplished a great deal, and *are* ready to move into this world in new and exciting ways. But I suspect they would be the first to acknowledge that for all their preparation, they aren't *really* ready for the next part of their journey. Sure, it is exciting, but it is also a little bit terrifying to think that all the things that made your life so familiar, schedules and bells, and daily routines, will be washed clean from the board as this new road rises.

It is that exhilarating terror, that turn from gift to appreciation that Mitchell mines in his translation of the 8th Psalm, and it is written in my book as the very definition of Wisdom...the Wisdom of which the teacher spoke in our readings this morning from Proverbs. You see I am of the deep conviction that we live in a world that, though filled to overflowing with *knowledge* seems to teeter on the brink of bankruptcy when it comes to wisdom. We know *how* to do just about anything, and we seem ready to try just about everything, but *when* we should do it, *why* we should do it, is it ever best to say “no” even though we *are able*, are questions too often left behind in the exhilaration of the fact that we *can*. Though created little less than angels, I fear we do not often consider how wonderfully, and terribly, we have been made.

It is a most intriguing fact of the biblical universe, in my mind, that wisdom *precedes* all *doing*. Listen carefully to the teacher in Proverbs: Wisdom is “created at the beginning of (God's) work, the first acts of long ago.” Let that sink in just a bit. Wisdom is not that which follows along after we realize what we can do. It is that which stands before our abilities...it is the “why” that not only encompasses all creation, but is that which set all creation in motion.

It is something that I think was understood, at least at some level, but the incredibly brilliant pool of minds who were drawn together as we made our way through the Second World War in order to harness, and unleash, the power of the atom. Albert Einstein was the genius behind the effort, remarked later “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking.” And Einstein was wise enough to understand that without a change in our mode of thinking, the presence of such horrifying potential in this world would leave us to drift toward destruction. The simple fact is that the wisdom we seek does not necessarily lie at the end of our pursuit of knowledge—the thing we will be able to distill, once we have gotten every last ounce of understanding out of this world. Wisdom stands before knowledge, and if we do not acknowledge this order, our best acts will lead only to our demise.

Douglas Copeland has written an influential book called *Life After God*, and he makes a similar point in his own way. After seeking to construct a world out of strong reasoning, and thoughtful consideration, he concludes, “My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me to be

kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”² Wisdom lies in the appreciation of the limits of our knowing, which the teacher understands, comes when we see it as the beginning, and not the end of our path.

The secret of the brilliant, but broken world in which we live is that we *do* need God. Even as hardened a philosophical mind as Martin Heidegger, in his final interview, acknowledged “Only God can save us..” The equally wondrous secret of the world that assembles here, before this table, is that the God we need is, and has promised always, to be with us! Truthfully, our lesson from Proverbs has created a theological minefield because it states so clearly that God *created* wisdom...it’s a problem for Trinitarian formulations of God. But this morning, I am willing to set those questions aside, and acknowledge that the wonders of God do not always fit into the confines of our speaking. What we claim, as Christians, is that this Word is not distant, inaccessible. When Moses was summarizing the Law for the people of Israel, he said, “this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”³

And when John sought to introduce his telling of the story of Jesus, he said that it was this very Word that became flesh, and “dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” This is the true mystery of the love that we proclaim: that the Wisdom by which and through which this world was created dwells *among* us, and we “have beheld his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The powerful claim of the Gospel, embodied as we dare to approach this table, is that the wisdom we seek and need for living in this world is not some Ideal, locked away in the heavens, inaccessible to mere mortals, but it is a love that pours itself out into this world, and invites us to follow.

We *are* fearfully and wonderfully made...little less than the angels! But we are made for a purpose, and our life is fulfilled only as that purpose is realized in this world:

*Unnamable God, how measureless
is your power on all the earth...*

*Unnamable God, how terrible
is our power on all the earth...*

Fed by the hand of God at this table, may we all live in that delicate dance between God’s unmeasured power, and the terrifying possibilities of our response. For it is in that in-between that the Wisdom of God, present before the ages, present with us now, will be revealed.

Let us pray.

² Cited by Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, in *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, Downer’s Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2004, p.15.

³ Deut. 30:11-14.