

Where to Begin?

Luke 6:47-49, Proverbs 1:1-7, 2:1-9

First Presbyterian Church

April 18, 2021

Suppose that about 3,000 or so years ago you had been a student at a school of wisdom in the ancient Near East. Historians believe such schools existed, particularly in Egypt and possibly in Israel. The teachers in these schools were renowned sages – wise men whose job it was to share their wisdom – gleaned from many centuries of living – to students whose job it was to absorb this wisdom. Well, if you were a student in such a school, what do you suppose the final exam would look like? No one is certain, of course, but a number of scholars think that exams involved the teacher throwing out the first half of a proverb... with the student then being required to complete the wise saying.

So, just for fun let's see how you might do on such a test. Let me toss out for you the first part of some proverbs and then you respond by finishing the line - just say it out loud... OK?

“Spare the rod . . . *spoil the child.*”

“What goes up . . . *must come down.*”

“A fool and his money . . . *are soon parted.*”

“The grass is always greener . . . *on the other side of the fence.*”

“People who live in glass houses . . . *should not throw stones.*”

Well, this morning we begin a short series of sermons from the Bible's Wisdom literature... and the first proverb we encounter is one many of you may know: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Today and next Sunday we will spend time in the Book of Proverbs... then moving to Ecclesiastes... and ending up in the Song of Songs or Song of Solomon.

Gospel Reading – Luke 6:47-49

⁴⁷I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them

⁴⁸That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.

⁴⁹But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”

Hebrew Bible Reading – Proverbs 1:1-7, 2:1-8

he proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

²For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,

³for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;

⁴to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—

⁵let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,

⁶to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
²My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
²making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
³if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
⁴if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
⁵then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
⁶For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
⁷he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
⁸guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

Sermon

I have a confession to make. Whenever I hear someone say, “You know, this nation just needs to get back to God” or “What America needs is to get back to godly values” – whenever I hear statements like that, I cringe... (and not just a little, I cringe a lot!). I cringe because I know that at least in some cases... not all, but in some cases, the God want to “get back to” is the God I have come to know in Jesus the Christ... and the values they want to recover are not the values I find when I read the Scriptures... However, if I am completely honest... sometimes I find myself saying very SIMILAR words... I find myself saying: “You know, our nation really needs God right now...” and, “You know, our world would be a lot better off if we could only put God’s values first.”

This week I found myself resonating (which really means agreeing) with Andres Oppenheimer in an essay he wrote for the Miami Herald that was printed in the Charlotte Observer.¹ He began by noting that contrary to what some folks expected, the COVID-19 pandemic has not brought about a religious revival in America. Well, I’m not sure I ever expected it to do that – I remember all-too-well the short-lived revival after 9/11 – church attendance was back to normal in a matter of a few short weeks. But I also remember this time last year hearing preachers who predicted a great revival of faith would come out of the fear and vulnerability that the pandemic was forcing on us. Some even said that God sent the pandemic... caused the pandemic... for this very purpose.

Well, nothing I hear or read or see leads me to believe that some great revival has happened. Instead, several polls show just the opposite.

¹ Andres Oppenheimer, Religion is Losing Ground Around the World: Political Extremism Might Be Filling the Void, Miami Herald, April 9, 2021.

According to a March 29 Gallup poll (that's less than three weeks ago), membership in churches, mosques and synagogues has fallen to record lows... and for the first time in nearly a century, less than half of the U.S. population reports that they are members of houses of worship. Right now, only 47 percent of Americans say they are members of churches, mosques, or synagogues – that's down from 70 percent just 20 years ago. In fact, growing numbers of people don't identify with any religion at all. The percentage of Americans who say they don't have any religious affiliation (the so-called "nones") rose from 8 percent just two decades ago to 21 percent today. You won't be surprised that younger people are much less likely to belong to a house of worship or to describe themselves as belonging to any religion. But for me, the real shocker is that this is true of older generations as well... our older Americans have shown double-digit decreases in church membership from just two decades ago.

Of course, not everyone sees this as a bad thing. Surveying the history of suffering that religion has caused – of all the violence that has been done in the name of religion, some believe that this decline religiosity will make for a better world – that drained of faith's inflaming passions, our politics will be more rational... there will be less divisiveness and hurt... that we will see far fewer conflicts that sometimes turn into all-out wars.² You might call this a secularist view... and the truth is Andres Oppenheimer identifies as a secularist - he fully admits that he is not a religious person himself. Yet, he confesses that on further reflection... as he looks at this severe decline of religion that is taking place across the West, and especially in Christian churches... he says: "I'm not sure that's a good thing... the decline of religion in America has a huge downside, he says... because we urgently need a moral compass."³ A moral compass. We urgently need a moral compass.

Well, the need for a moral compass was precisely the reason why thousands of years ago mothers and fathers sat their children down and taught them "proverbs." As we illustrated in our final exam at the start of the service, Proverbs are short, pithy expressions of common-sense wisdom that had been gained over the ages... and parents used them to teach their children virtues to live by... to help them understand how life works and how to live it well. Passing on these proverbs was part of how parents took seriously their responsibility for developing "character" in their children. So, there were proverbs relating to all the issues of everyday life – money, friends, family, work, sex, politics... everything. And parents covered them all as they passed along the wisdom of the sages to their children.⁴

Yet, according to our passage today, at the root of all these wise sayings... indeed, at the very beginning of them all... is one key thing: "the fear of the Lord." "The fear of the Lord... is the beginning of knowledge... the fear of the Lord... is the beginning of wisdom..."

Now, what does that mean exactly? Well, it DOESN'T MEAN what you may think. This is NOT the kind of fear you have for a cruel parent who is just waiting for you to mess up so they can spank you... and this is not Jonathan Edward's "sinners in the hands of an angry God."

² Shadi Hamid, "America Without God," The Atlantic, published online on March 10, 2021.

³ Oppenheimer.

⁴ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker in her commentary on this passage found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-wisdom/commentary-on-proverbs-11-7-31-8-822-36-101-12-ecclesiastes-11-18-218-26-31-8>

Although this “fear of the Lord” has its origins in powerful experiences of God’s majesty like that displayed at Mt. Sinai, THIS fear is less about the emotion of being afraid... and more about being in complete awe of God... its more about having utter respect and appreciation for who God is... and it’s all about us living life all parts of our lives devoted to God’s purposes... and humbly offering ourselves heart, mind, soul, and strength in God’s service. The fear of the Lord is a radical God-centeredness that shapes absolutely everything in our lives – what we do with our time and money, the way we vote, how we do our work and school, how we treat our spouses and children and strangers, how we relate non-human creatures in our environment. We truly “fear” God when we build our whole lives around God because we take God more seriously than anything else... than ANYTHING else. And... bottom line... the fear of the Lord... is based on our understanding... that God is God, and we are not. When we are faced with the One who called the universe into being... that scattered the stars in space... and who sustains the world every moment of every day... our proper response is awe, reverence... and yes, even (to some extent) fear. But not the kind of fear that makes us want to run away... the kind of fear that draws us even closer to.

I love C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* – especially one scene that speaks to this Lord we are to fear. Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are trying to explain to the children about Aslan, the great and mighty Lion who is the Christ figure in the story... and whom they are soon to meet. Mrs. Beaver says: “Aslan is a lion — *the* Lion, the great Lion.” “Ooh” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he — quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or just plain silly.” “Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy. “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver ... “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”⁴

The fear of the LORD... the fear of this good King... is the beginning for wisdom.⁵ Is there any more important lesson that parents can teach their kids than this - that they are not the center of the universe, but the One WHO IS loves them dearly? that there is something (we would say “Someone”) who is bigger and stronger and wiser and more loving than they are... but who calls them beloved and wants them to live life well?

As to the decline in religious belief and practice in our nation, it will not surprise you that I agree with Mr. Oppenheimer that we urgently need a moral compass... human beings NEED a moral compass... and though religions are certainly not the only teachers of values, it is clear to me that the decline of religion in our nation is leaving a huge vacuum – a vacuum which will always be filled by other powers... other values... other loyalties. If religions aren’t around to teach us basic values... to espouse certain virtues... and to point to the God who is the beginning of wisdom - who will do it instead?

Finally, this. We should always remember that the proverb is very clear and specific: the fear of the Lord is the BEGINNING of wisdom.” Which means that life is not static but is a journey whose end is found in a God-centered beginning.⁶

⁵ Schifferdecker.

⁶ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen in the New Interpreter’s Bible (Abingdon,1997), p.34

In other words, God is the beginning of wisdom that we are still learning... still gaining... still living by... and still passing on in THIS community... THIS church... when OUR young ones learn from parents and the parents of friends and their Sunday School teachers and their youth advisors and their surrogate grandparents. Frankly, I don't know any other way to address the decline in religious belief and practice in our nation... than to double-down and try to live our lives in the knowledge that God is God, and we are not... to renew our commitment to build our whole lives around God... to just take God more seriously than anything else... really... more seriously than ANYTHING else. And if we can do that... our children... and our neighbors... will at the very least have the chance to see what we see... to know what we know... to find what we have found... that it's all about God... who God is... and what God wants for us his beloved children.