

Listen to the Lady
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Proverbs 1:20-33

²⁰ Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
²¹ At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
²² 'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
²³ Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
²⁴ Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
²⁵ and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
²⁶ I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
²⁷ when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
²⁸ Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
²⁹ Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
³⁰ would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
³¹ therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
³² For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
³³ but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.' (NRSV)

Sermon:

This morning I would like to make a rather general case for people reading and studying the book of Proverbs. I do this in the face of what at times seems to me to be people's total disregard for courtesy or moral and ethical conduct. I don't know if this is out of willfulness or people just don't know any better. So, my time this morning hopefully will be informative as well as sermonic.

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, was divided into sections known as the Torah, the Teachings; the Prophets, and the Writings. The Writings contained wisdom literature of which Proverbs is one of those books. Wisdom literature attempts to convey to its readers the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and the collective insights of others. Such literature was a way of conveying instructions about honorable and ethical behaviors believed to bring an over-plus to a person's quality of life and relationships, regardless of their socio-economic status. Wisdom in its essence allows the wise to participate in

life's fullest potential for joy - not just happiness or pleasure per se but joy, the profound appreciation of life as a divine-human encounter in every aspect of one's life.

The author-commentator of Proverbs tells us that the good life begins with respect for God as Creator and Lord of Life, something the fool rejects. Sadly, many foolish people in our modern, western world reject or deny God and God's ways to their and others' detriment. The Pew Research Center, in several reports, indicated a growing number of people in America being classified as "religious nones." "Nones" as "not having any" as opposed to nuns in the Catholic tradition. This is an umbrella category for U.S. adults, mostly young people, who identify religiously as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular." One survey released in 2016 indicated that many of these "nones" are ex-Christians, who have come to reject any religious affiliations, although many remain what they call "spiritual" and believe in God of sorts.

I gleaned from these surveys that the major reasons these people became "nones" was their distrust of institutional religion, science-vs.-religion issues; a lack of solid, this-world proofs for religious beliefs along with a standard of living that belies their sense of a need for God and religion. J. Warner Wallace, a senior fellow at the Colson Institute in a recent article on the topic says that he thinks a major reason for the growing number of "nones" may be because, and I paraphrase him, the "nones" don't believe anyone in the Church can answer their questions or make a case for Christianity and a belief in God beyond just tradition. I think the "nones" are a growing indictment of the Church's failure to communicate its divine-human message within the environment of modern science, globalism, and multiculturalism because mainstream Christianity in this nation is floundering and devoting a disproportionate amount of its interests and resources to institutional survival at the expense of engaging people's spiritual consciousness.

To the book of Proverbs and our text. The inherent challenges faced by readers of any generation when reading the book of Proverbs lies in its Ancient Near East cultural context. In addition, western women face the additional challenge of appropriating the wisdom of Proverbs since it appears to be written primarily to and for young men coming of age. Such wisdom literature was and is a means of instructing young men in a collectivistic society on how to deal with their potentially destructive sexual energy, but also the ways and means of being responsible providers, managers, and increasing and safe-guarding their and their family's honor, synonymous with the family's safety and prosperity.

The opening verses of Proverbs clearly spell out the book's intent that "men" (men, not generic humankind) may know wisdom and instructions, understand words of insight, receive instruction in wise dealings, righteousness, justice, and equity. Men who listen and heed the teachings in the book of Proverbs will be honorable men able to distinguish good from evil and wisdom from folly.

Traditionally, many western biblical scholars, male and female, tend to highlight women in the bible within the context of their subordinate relationships to men rather than seeing them as one side of a partnership in an Ancient Near Eastern family's survival and wellbeing. However, if one reads Proverbs through the eyes of an Ancient Near Easterner, one may get a totally different view. I say this because Israelite mothers taught wisdom (1:8; 6:20; 31:1). In today's scriptures, wisdom is personified as a woman (1:20-33; 8:1-35; 9:1-6), and the human incarnation of wisdom is a capable and industrious woman (31:10-31). I tend to see the book of Proverbs as a sort of textbook for men on how to be good men dictated by a woman - Lady Wisdom and her perspectives on how to protect and maintain the wellbeing and integrity of the family and individuals within the family.

Now, this is not that unusual, as many of us men know. Most of our early formative years were spent with our mothers, grandmothers, female school teachers, and female Sunday school teachers. I never had a male teacher until I was in junior high or a male Sunday school teacher until I was in high school

In the ancient Hebrew cultures and some modern cultures, children as a rule, spend most of their early lives under the care and control of their mothers, grandmothers, or other female family caregivers while living in the women's quarters until they reached puberty. During these formative years, female caregivers influenced and taught boys either directly or indirectly about what was

expected of them as men of the family. In the ancient Mediterranean world, after puberty, or around eight or nine, young men were abruptly and harshly thrown into the hierarchical and authoritarian world of men. (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 19xx p. 387)

I would add, not as a footnote, but as a declarative statement that in the ancient and some parts of the modern Near East, childhood for women ends at puberty or shortly before. Also, a woman's self-determination beyond the boundaries of her culture, as we understand self-determination, was and is relatively nonexistent. However, within her role as wife and mother, women could and did exercise great authority within the family, the village, and in the palaces of the royal families.

To this let me add that amid the worship of multiple gods and goddesses in the ANE, there was a major effort in the Hebrew Scriptures from around 400 B.C.E. to strip Yahweh (God) of any female dimensions or associations. It is believed this was not so much male chauvinism or an anti-female effort as it was a response to the cultic lure of the female goddesses on the people of God. It failed.

The sacred feminine has always been a part of humankind's understandings of itself, reality, and the holy, and always will be. The Hebrew Scriptures and our New Testament are replete with images and references to the sacred feminine although they are often veiled or obscured, especially for the uninitiated, western religious mind. To this point, in the Hebrew and Aramaic, like other languages, words have gender; not only nouns but verbs and adjectives. So, for a Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek speaking person to read or hear a word be it a noun, verb, or an adjective, is to automatically appropriate its gender references and all that may mean within their cultural context.

Therefore, in our scriptures this morning, it is only fitting that we hear wisdom, when personified, personified as a woman since the Hebrew word for wisdom is *Ḥokmah*, a feminine noun. This Hebrew word translated into Greek is *Sophia*. Later Talmudic authors will introduce the word "shekina", a word in the feminine often used synonymously for wisdom that is not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. The original meaning of the word "shekina" was the manifestation of God that can be experienced by human senses that dwells among or with humankind. (Patai, 1990, 96-99) Among the more mystical Jewish Kabbalist the "shekina" was a divine feminine aspect of God.

By the time Proverbs is compiled, there had been a long literary and metaphysical history in the ANE of understanding the various emanations or divine attributes of the gods or God as being personified and one such personification is Wisdom. In Proverbs, Wisdom was the first creation of God and was with God in the beginning, assisting, advising, purposing, and enjoying all that God did and was to do. (Proverbs 8:22-31) However, her greatest delight was in humankind.

It is interesting to note that throughout Proverbs, Wisdom is to accompany a young man in his life journey. The success of a man's life is inextricably linked to his wife as he strives to maintain or enhance his and his family's honor, the pivotal value in the Ancient Near Eastern world. In short, for a young man to be loyally devoted and protective of his wife and family as opposed to chasing after loose women, single or married, embodies wisdom. When his loyalty is misplaced; that is, when he loses direction and social, cultural, and moral boundaries are violated; when material goods are misappropriated, such things bring dishonor, shame, and destruction and stand in opposition to wisdom, branding the man a fool, a dishonorable person among his people.

In Verses 8-10, which we did not hear this morning, Wisdom coaches naïve young men about the company they keep and any associations with murderous gangs of lawless fools. Such people believe themselves superior to others, but their ends are disgrace and death. Now we understand why our parents wanted to know who our friends were and who their people were.

In verses 20-33, Lady Wisdom establishes herself as worthy to be listened to as contrasted later to Dame Folly, symbolically portrayed as the "strange woman". Dame Wisdom makes her ways and precepts known in the most public of forms for all to hear - young and old, rich or poor. She goes out into the market places, she shouts her ways at the entrances to the city where people come and go. She tried to use television and radio, the newspapers, and various educational institutions but got shouted down by people's foolish notions of self-determination, moral relativism, and their lowest common denominators of sensual voyeurism.

The self-destructive simpletons, who love their ways of self-gratification with no regards for others or the sanctity of their own sacred being, scoffed at her calls to mend their ways and seek life not death. Dame Wisdom's voice could not be heard over the raucous laughter of the fools who reveled in their hedonism that had been made so attractive and alluring to the simpleminded by Hollywood and the media as they glamorized the "gangster" and gang-life, drugs, unbridled sexuality, and political and social corruption as a nightly drama that mesmerizes the simple minded.

So, when the chickens of a willful, misspent youth, hedonism, moral, political, and social corruptions come home to roost, don't look to Lady Wisdom for answers and relief. Don't cry for help after the horse is out of the barn. Lady Wisdom tried to warn those fools to be prudent and keep the barn doors closed, she cautioned the fools and wastrels to safe guard the hen house, so the foxes could not get in, but the fools would not listen - he or she knew best and were caught up in folly and now they must pay the piper. Sorry about mixing metaphors, but I have simply drawn on wisdom teachings in the book of Proverbs.

Now the fools must live with the consequences of STDs beyond medical help; he or she must now live with the neurological damages from drug and alcohol abuse that science cannot help, not to mention irreparable damage done to relationships. He or she must now serve their prison terms for their foolishness. He or she must wear their physical, emotional, and social badges of shame and stigma.

When calamitous consequences strike, Lady Wisdom will now mock the unheeding and naïve fools, who scorned her call to embrace the ways of life with her ironic laughter. No, not the laughter of glee, but the ironic laughter of those who watch the World's Dumbest Videos.

In addition to the practical lessons, I think Dame Wisdom makes it perfectly clear that there is an indisputable realm of cause and effect in this universe that can either bless or destroy. To these ends, the basic teachings of the first 15 chapters of Proverbs tell us that right living produces relative prosperity and well-being. Folly (foolishness) and wickedness produce poverty, disgrace, and even death. This is the case because God made the world by whatever means and installed divine principles to govern life, and those who seek the ways of Wisdom will find the ways of life and it more abundantly.

Yet it seems at times that the wicked can prosper, and the righteous can suffer unjustly. Still, Proverbs insists that it is better to be poor and godly than rich and wicked. I think the truly wise see the book of Proverbs as a profound book of faith (1:7), insisting on the reality of God's justice and righteousness, even when experience seems to contradict it.

Folks, there is a wisdom of the ages that comes from hard learned lessons, and there is the revealed wisdom of God and to violate either is to invite disaster. Our prisons are full of "lifers," our medical facilities and mental health agencies are overburdened with people who defied conventional and divine wisdom to their detriment and to the detriment of others. Our city, state, and national governments are burdened down with the social costs of people's sins and foolishness. Our people are over-taxed to compensate for fraud, waste, and abuse of government and millions of freeloaders. Folks, just as we can't defy gravity without consequences, neither can we defy the moral laws of life in the universe as the truly wise of this world understand.

I would venture to say that Lady Wisdom, as she looks upon our nation today, must be about to burst her sides with laughter as the wicked, the lazy, and willfully stupid reap their just desserts, while others, who would not make a stand for what is moral, right, and holy, pick up the costs.

No, I don't want to hear excuses, stories of mitigation, or extenuation, because the wisdom of the good, moral, and wholesome life have been around from the beginning and are available to the learned and unlearned alike in all cultures. Every time we excuse bad behaviors with sociological reasons we slap in the face the good, decent people who rose or rise above their circumstances to take a stand alongside the truly wise of this world.

Please let us not get compassion, mercy, and justice confused with compensation for or condoning of stupid, immoral, and willfully reckless human choices. Yes, it is sad that the innocent suffers because of the arrogant, ignorant, and evil; yes, it is sad that people often suffer

disproportionally for their choices, but that's the way it has always been and will always be. We do not, nor will we ever live in any imagined world where choices do not have consequences. The suffering of the innocent and guilty alike makes it even more important for the wise and righteous to go out into the streets, the public squares, the busiest corners, and proclaim and give witness to the ways of Wisdom, not make excuses for the foolish or the scoffer, who turned their back on Wisdom's call.

Therefore, in all seriousness, let us give heed to Wisdom's reproofs, open our hearts and minds to her counsel, and as many of us older people know, she will pour out her knowledge of the divine ways of life and it more abundantly and people will be blessed. Listen to the Lady, because she is the divine wisdom of every mother - the sacred feminine - who wants the best life possible for all her children.

I encourage you all to read the book of Proverbs and pass its wisdom on to your kids and grandkids. But, be sure to tell your daughters and granddaughters who is doing the teaching.

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