What Would You Ask For?

Proverbs 9: 1-6

Ephesians 5: 15-20

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings, essays and stories that cover a wide range of topics. In one of Billy Graham’s columns, he suggested that a meaningful devotional practice would be to read a chapter of Proverbs each day of the month. There are 31 chapters – one for each day of the month. There is much to mine there.

There is common sense [Pr 17:28]

*Even fools who keep silent are considered wise;*

*when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent*.

And other nuggets Pr 15: 1

*A soft answer turns away wrath,*

*but a harsh word stirs up anger*.

There is wonder: Proverbs 30: 18-19 [the MSG]

*Three things amaze me,*

*no, four things I’ll never understand—*

*how an eagle flies so high in the sky,*

*how a snake glides over a rock,*

*how a ship navigates the ocean,*

*why adolescents act the way they do.*

Proverbs 31: 10-31 contains a hymn or ode to a Good Wife. I have been asked to use that in funerals before. But aside from those verses, I confess to never having used a text from Proverbs in a sermon. Until today.

I came to these verses from Proverbs 9 because they are part of the Revised Common Lectionary. A lectionary is a list of readings. In this case it is a selection of scriptures agreed upon to be text for preaching. It is a tool that I have often used in preparation for this task of preaching. And so I came to it today.

These verses speak of what wisdom has to offer. It strikes me that the world needs to hear about wisdom in our time. I know that I too need to hear it.

The message of Proverbs 9 is pretty simple – wisdom is better than foolishness. That’s what Bible scholar Sara Koeing wrote in 2009.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In Proverbs, and other places in the Bible, wisdom is personified as a woman. You probably know someone named Wisdom – only you have heard it as Sophia. That’s the Greek word used in translation from the Hebrew. In both Hebrew and Greek nouns have gender assigned to them –and wisdom is feminine.

Proverbs 8 identified Wisdom as being present at the creation.

25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—

26 when he [God] had not yet made earth and fields,

or the world’s first bits of soil.

27 When he [God] established the heavens, I was there,

when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, ….

when he [God] marked out the foundations of the earth,

30 then I was beside him [God], like a master worker;

and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,

31rejoicing in his [God’s] inhabited world

and delighting in the human race.

The work of Wisdom is to prepare a feast for the world. Maybe not unlike the feast we share in communion. The feast of Proverbs is to make available to any and all that there is sustenance and substance from the Lord. To share in this abundance

*Lay aside immaturity and live,and walk in the way of insight.*

Sounds simple. But what does it look like?

The book of Proverbs is often associated with King Solomon. Solomon was David’s son and heir to the kingdom. The story of that family and transition is full of all kinds of twists and turns. But after David died, there is an account of a dream that Solomon had in I Kings 3. In the dream God said to Solomon: “Ask what I should give you.” [I Kings 3: 5]

He was a young ruler and he replied:

*I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”* [I Kings 3: 7-9]

He did not ask for wealth or long life or the defeat and death of enemies or prosperity. He didn’t ask for those things which you and I, if we are honest, might ask for. Solomon wanted to know how to make good decisions.

The Lord was impressed. In so many words God replied – You got it. And because you weren’t greedy about other things, you will receive those other things as well.

Immediately after this blessing in I Kings 3, the new king is tested. There is a tale of two women who come to the king to ask for a decision. They live in the same house and both gave birth within 3 days. But in the first days of the babies’ new lives, one of the mothers fell asleep and smothered her child. But she took her dead baby and while the other woman slept she replaced her now dead child with the one still alive. When the woman whose child was taken arose and realized what had happened she protested – and the place for a decision was before the king.

So the king made his judgment – he asked for a sword. His solution was to divide the baby. But the mother of the child cried out – this is madness. Scripture reads:

*But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—“Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!” The other said, “It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.”*

The king knew what to do. He never intended to literally kill the child. By the way the women responded the kind knew who was the mother. The people stood in awe of this administration of justice. They saw in his actions “the wisdom of God” so that the right thing would be done.

Discerning is hard work. You and I may be presented with information that is confusing or convoluted. But the wisdom of God is there. If only we allow ourselves to be receptive to it. And maybe even for you and I to ask to stand in it.

Finally, the scripture from Ephesians speaks about living in the wisdom of the Lord. Those who first received these words were living in challenging times. Figuring out how to relate to others who did not accept their decision to follow God in Christ was a challenge. How much of the old ways do we keep? What does it look like to create a community of faith with Christ at the center? They are questions we still have today.

There is an element of common sense here.

*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*

Then the specific instructions: *Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, . . .*

There are other places where other behaviors are included in the injunction to avoid debauchery. But here only drinking too much wine is mentioned. There are certainly bad things that can come from intoxication. When I was in high school I was part of a play by James Thurber, the American humorist. It was a series of short pieces based on his sketches. One was *If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox.* I played Grant. Suffice it to say, there is some revision of history.

YouTube and other places on the internet are full of videos where intoxicated people fall down and make a fool of themselves. But there are real consequences. People really do get hurt requiring medical treatment. Or they may hurt someone else by losing control in a conversation or while behind driving. It may look funny. But it is not.

Of course, it is not just drinking wine, or other spirits, that cause this. To be fair, the story goes that bourbon whiskey was invented by Elijah Craig, a Baptist preacher in Kentucky. Whatever gets you to do things that are unwise is a cause for attention.

Presbyterian minister Rick Dietrich said:

*Pay attention, the writer of the letter tells his friends in Ephesus. Pay attention, pay close attention. Pay attention closely and pay attention to things close by. Pay attention to the important things and, indeed, to all things. Pay attention now. Keep paying attention.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

But that is not the last of it. Christians don’t have to be dour to be attentive and wise. The scriptrue from Ephesians ends with words to enjoy life and to be filled with the Spirit:

*be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This week Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, died. One of her songs is *Think*. It has some words that are useful in thinking about being wise:

You better think (think) Think about what you're trying to do to me  
 Yeah, think (think, think) Let your mind go, let yourself be free

Oh, freedom (freedom), freedom (freedom) Oh, freedom, yeah, freedom  
 Freedom (freedom), freedom (freedom) Freedom, oh freedom

People walking around everyday; Playing games, taking score  
 Trying to make other people lose their minds. Ah, be careful you don't lose yours, oh!

Think (think)   
 You need me (need me) and I need you (don't you know)  
 Without each other there ain't nothing people can do, oh, Think about it, baby.

(What are you trying to do me)

Think about what you're trying to do to me,   
 Think (think); Let your mind go, let yourself be free[[3]](#footnote-3)

That sounds a lot like the words of invitation from Lady Wisdom:

*“Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed.”*

Following worship today we will have a chance to come and share a meal together. Consider this your invitation to be filled with God’s Spirit and respond to Wisdom’s invitation.

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1. Sara Koeing, August 16, 2009, [Working Preacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=370). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Rick Dietrich, Day 1,](http://day1.org/502-hey_pay_attention) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Google Search[, *Think*, Aretha Franklin](https://www.google.com/search?q=think+aretha+franklin&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-1-ab). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)