

Sermon Starter and Response – Wisdom Calls

Proverbs 8:1-9:6

Sermon Starter

Wisdom calls: “Women and men, people everywhere, I’m calling out to you! I cry out to all humankind!” Just what or who is this Wisdom who calls to us in Proverbs and other places in the Old Testament? And who is “Sophia,” a name we often hear associated with the figure of Wisdom?

Wisdom is a facet, or characteristic, of God that appears in both the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the so-called “Wisdom literature” — Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. Wisdom is described as sound judgment, common sense, good counsel, understanding, and the upright way. Wisdom in the Bible (with a capital W) has deeper significance than the wisdom (lowercase *w*) in our general vocabulary. Wisdom in the Bible is more than making smart decisions, more than astuteness gained with age, and more than sophistication in scholarship and philosophical reflection. Biblical Wisdom is an animating quality of God that people have access to through God’s grace and love. If we are open to it, Wisdom can inhabit us and transform our hearts and minds.

Proverbs 8:12 speaks of Wisdom as a *habitat*, particularly the habitat of sound judgment. People today are increasingly learning about the importance of the environment for health and wholeness. The quality of the air we breathe is in direct relationship with one’s likelihood for illness. Similarly, Wisdom as an element of our inner environment is equally important. It is the element that allows for healthy thought, reflection, and decision making. Engaging more than just our minds, biblical Wisdom is an inner habitat that allows our minds to become integrated with our hearts, spirits, and bodies so that our thoughts, reflections, decisions, and actions are grounded in the many ways God might choose to communicate with us.

What about Sophia? Usually, the Bible is translated into English using ancient manuscripts written in either biblical Greek or biblical Hebrew. *Sophia* (σοφία) is the Greek word for wisdom, and *hok-ma* (חכמה) is the Hebrew word for wisdom. Unlike English, nouns have gender in Greek and Hebrew. In both Greek and Hebrew the words for wisdom are feminine, and the biblical text uses the pronoun *she* when referring to God’s Wisdom. Because Wisdom is personified in the biblical text, named as a part of God’s own being, and has a deeper and fuller meaning than the notion of wisdom in common speech, many translators of the Bible prefer to capitalize biblical Wisdom. Others forego translating the Greek word σοφία altogether and instead spell its pronunciation in English: Sophia. The hope is that these choices will help communicate that God’s Wisdom is a character of profound significance.

Since it is common in the church and in many cultures of North America for characteristics of God to be described using predominately male language, it can be both challenging and liberating to embrace the biblical account of Wisdom as a boldly feminine facet of God. She was with God before creation began. She calls humanity to her side with authority. She is to be revered as a teacher to all, men and women alike. It is from her that rulers gain the power to govern justly. She offers a feast with bread and wine to anyone willing to sit at her table. Those who find her find life.

These descriptions of Wisdom in Proverbs have a relationship to certain descriptions of Christ in the New Testament. Consider Colossians 1:15-20, in which Christ is also said to have existed “before anything was created.” Or, think of Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, in which Christ offers the disciples bread and wine at his table. Scattered throughout the New Testament are claims that those who follow Christ will find life. Perhaps even more interesting is the gospel of John’s use of the term *the Word* in referring to Christ. In the gospel writer’s culture, wisdom was commonly described as a “Word from God.” While there is no way to know for sure, it is possible that using the term *Word* was the writer’s way of describing the concept of biblical Wisdom. By placing *Word*, and thus Wisdom, squarely in context with God in Christ, the gospel of John asserts that all true Wisdom comes from and resides in God in Christ.

Proverbs 8 tells us that above the clamor of all that competes for our attention day by day, biblical Wisdom calls out to humanity, inviting each of us to pause, turn toward her, and listen. To those who hear her, she offers understanding. Better than silver and gold, the wealth she gives is that of truth, justice, clarity of mind and spirit. The power she gives does not perpetuate abuse, coercion, manipulation, or oppression. Wisdom offers her followers the kind of power that participates in God’s mission of reconciliation for all of creation. It is the power of divine liberation.

May we be guided by the quest to hear the voice of God’s Wisdom. Let us seek out her table, where she has prepared food and drink. Let us respond to her invitation to come eat her bread, drink her wine, and live, walking in the path of understanding. For those who find Wisdom find life and earn the favor of God.

Response

Option 1

During the service, create a space for participants to reflect on the various ways that Wisdom manifests in daily living. Ask all who are gathered to call out the names of people, communities, or other aspects of God's creation (crashing waves, a sunrise, the playfulness of animals) that have revealed to them some aspect of God's Wisdom.

Option 2

Prior to the service, ask participants to bring to the service items that represent some aspect of God's Wisdom. As a visual, set up a table in the center or front of the worship space. Place food and drink (perhaps bread or fruit or cheese and a goblet filled with juice) in the center of the table with empty space around it. As a response activity, invite participants to bring forward their items and decorate the table. Conclude with the following prayer:

God, you saturate our lives with opportunities to hear the voice of Wisdom.

In bringing these reminders of Wisdom forward,

we acknowledge and celebrate the many gifts she offers.

Give us ears that listen to her voice

and hearts that seek her table,

a table filled with good gifts,

with food and drink,

with understanding and life. Amen.

Option 3

Set up a table in the center or front of the worship space and fill it with food and drink (perhaps juice and bread, crackers, cheese, fruit, or candy). Provide utensils for serving and eating. As a response activity, invite participants forward to partake of the feast set at Wisdom's table. Consider using these words as an invitation to the feast:

Leader: Doesn't Wisdom call?
Doesn't Understanding raise her voice?
On the hills and throughout the cities, she cries out:
Women and men, people everywhere, I'm calling out to you!
I cry out to all of humanity!
Whoever wants enlightenment, step this way!
Abandon your foolishness
that you may live and walk the path of understanding.
You who find me find life and earn the favor of God.

Wisdom has prepared her food,
decanted her wine,
and set her table,
inviting anyone who yearns for life
to come eat her bread and drink her wine.
You are invited to come now, to eat and drink at Wisdom's table.

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