

“True Wisdom—Part 1”  
February 26, 2023

Ecclesiastes 8:6-9  
Matthew 4:1-11

The season of Lent begins by hitting us right between the eyes.

Because of the weather, we waited until last Friday to be confronted with our own mortality and with, as that night’s reading from Ecclesiastes put it, the vanity, emptiness of all of life. What a way to start the weekend!

In the light of the hard truth that we will die we were invited to turn once more to the living God. That doesn’t change the fact that we will die, but it might change how we live.

How will we live? That is our question for these days.

Wisdom has been described as the ability to live optimally in a world that is confusing and never completely understandable. During Lent this year, we are turning to the “Wisdom Literature” in the Hebrew Scripture give us some guidance, not just for these forty days, but for all of our days.

John Calvin’s work in France and Switzerland led to the Reformation in England and, therefore, ultimately to the development of Congregational churches such as ours. He wrote at the beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that all true wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.

Calvin suggests that the more we know of ourselves, the more we know of God. And as our knowledge of God develops, we come to know ourselves better as well. When we know our own finitude, we come to better recognize the depth and breadth of wisdom and goodness and love that are found in God. In the same way, as we grow even in our limited, human knowledge of God, we begin to better understand who we are as human beings—finite and fallible, yes, but also created with an ability to create, with the freedom to choose, with the need to love.

It is not easy to discern which brings forth the other, but self-knowledge seems to lead us to seek and, to some extent, even to know God. At the same time, we can’t really have a clear understanding of ourselves unless we also have some knowledge of God.

Our knowledge of God is limited at best.

And our knowledge of ourselves is incomplete as well.

We’ll come back to our knowledge of God next Sunday. This morning, let us consider for a few minutes that first part of “true wisdom”: our knowledge of ourselves.

One of the things we know about ourselves as human beings is that first lesson of Lent: we will die. Indeed, it’s said that human beings are the only creatures who know that they will die. And such knowledge has an ambiguous nature to it. On the one hand, the awareness of our mortality can be a cause of great anxiety. At the same time, an existence that went on endlessly, in time

would seem to be senseless and pointless. Our existence has meaning and our actions have urgency because one day we will die—and we know that. We are finite.

But beyond this, what else do we know of ourselves?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great pastor, theologian and reformer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis for his role in the plot against Hitler wrote a poem from his prison cell that asks: “Who am I?” Bonhoeffer describes the brave person that others say he is and then asks:

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
 Or am I only what I know of myself,  
 restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage...  
 yearning for colors, for flowers...thirsting for words of kindness...  
 weary and empty at praying, at thinking...  
 faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?  
 Who am I?

Bonhoeffer’s concern was certainly not new in human history.

Nearly two thousand years before, Paul confessed to the early Christians in Rome: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

In the same letter he urges his readers: “Don’t cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance, but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities.”

Self-knowledge is a challenge—often a difficult undertaking—that is essential for the life of faith, both so that we don’t deceive ourselves as well as so that we might come to a deeper knowledge of God.

Who are we?

Hero or coward?

Saint or sinner?

Scholar or fool?

And who are we as people of faith, as Christians?

As we seek the wisdom that comes from self-knowledge, we are helped by the story of Jesus in the wilderness.

The crisis of the wilderness is brought on by a sense of the absence of God. The wilderness is the dwelling place of forces hostile to the God whose desire is life.

Reading through the Book of Ecclesiastes, we sense over and over the author of this book of wisdom spent a great deal of time in the wilderness. Over and over, we hear of the futility of all things and find little in this book that comforts us.

God's people wind up in the wastelands all the time. No one, however, is alone in the wilderness.

No one is ever alone in the desert. Others travel there too. And in spite of appearances and feelings, God is present in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, we might learn that no one—not you, not me—no one is alone.

Even Jesus needed time in the wilderness to learn the lesson of his identity. God's claim upon Jesus would only become apparent as he lived his life. The actions he took, the choices he made would reveal who he was.

What we see in the story of the temptation of Jesus is not so much a man wrestling with Satan as with himself. The tempting path was to create a kingdom in the world that would be established by works of wonder and ultimately works of violence against the Roman Empire. The tempting path was to give control of his life over to what would bring acclaim and adoration and power. Those options were real. What made Jesus appealing to so many people in his own time—and what continues to make him appealing in our time as well—is that he could have chosen another path but did not.

He chose a path of non-violence even when it would lead to his own suffering.

He chose a path of personal responsibility in the face of those who would take his very life.

Let me be clear. The outcome of that testing was not predetermined. Jesus was not simply going through the motions. He could have chosen otherwise—but he did not.

Jesus could have chosen otherwise—but his decision in the time of trial and temptation was to remain true to his authentic self and to his vision of God's realm of peace.

The same is true for us today.

We strive never to compromise on our fundamental values, no matter what the situation is. We make that choice.

Our choices will show who we are. The wilderness reveals our identity and leads us to the self-knowledge that is part of wisdom

We can learn the lessons of faithfulness, of identity, and of the constant presence of the God who makes new life possible.

We gain the knowledge of ourselves as we are: tempted human beings, prone to falling. As we face this—indeed only *if* we face our human condition—we are in the position to hear again the good news that comes to us in and through Jesus Christ.

We gain the knowledge of ourselves as we are: separated from God, separated from one another, separated even from the best in ourselves. We do all sorts of things as a result of this separation: some of them look good, some we call sinful. All of them point to the reality that we fall short of the glory of God; we fall short of what we would like to be; we fall short of what we need to be. We stand in need of forgiveness—human and divine.

Even in times of wilderness wandering and learning, even in times of testing and trial, we know how this story ends. We know how our story ends.

We begin this season of Lent at the edge of the wilderness—and let us do that with the end in mind. The end of Lent is Easter. The season that begins with last week’s reminder of our mortality ends with a celebration of the resurrection, with the joyful affirmation of the love of God that is stronger than death—even our own.

Bonhoeffer ended his poem this way:

Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?  
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

Who are you?

You are always someone who belongs to God, even the very child of God.

Can you be still for a moment and let that sink in? Above all else, you are a child of God.

And maybe that’s just what you needed to hear this morning. Maybe that’s what you came hoping to hear.

In the Talmud we read those wonderful words of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: “A procession of angels passes before a human being wherever he or she goes, proclaiming, “Make way for the image of God.” Think of the changes in our politics, our economics, our teaching and learning, our providing care, our creative work, our businesses, our family life if we held such a vision close to our hearts.

From such a vision, as we come to know ourselves, we will grow in wisdom.