

Wisdom Moves
Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20
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Pentecost +23
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This one is for the mystics. This one is for those chasing after Spirit. This one is for anyone and everyone wondering what the next right step is. That step may be here in this church, it may be in your personal life, or in this season as a nation right now. Do you find yourself asking what comes next? What happens next? What do I do next? What will we do now?

When you ask those questions, are you filled with hope and excitement and possibility? What could be? I could do this..I could do that. How will all of this play out? What *will* my life be like 5 years from now? What will our life *together* be like 5 years from now? What an opportunity! I'm so curious to see how the story goes.

Or are the questions you're asking soaked and heavy with anxiety and dread and anger? Here we are again. Totally stuck. What are we supposed to do this time? I've been here so many times before. Nothing's going to change now. Why should I even bother?

I've heard myself saying over and over again lately—you are carrying so much. We are carrying so much. Try as I might to expand my vocabulary and create different ways of expressing thoughts and shaping space, I come back to this visual metaphor of all that we are mentally and emotionally carrying with us through our days. I almost see a big straw basket that has leather straps and somehow wraps around each one of your shoulders, tethering all of us to the things we carry. If you want an example of what I mean, consider this:

In a week's time we have gone from a beautiful, moving All Saints worship experience as we've named and remembered all the people who are in our great cloud of witnesses to four hours of talking, processing, discernment, and sharing as we at St. Charles ask how we will be stewards of the physical space we have been given in which to gather as church. If you stuck with us for that six hour stretch, we remembered parents and friends and spouses and loved ones who have passed away but are still part of who we are. Then we immediately talked about plaster and water and pipes and HVAC and asking together, "How is Spirit leading us here as we consider who our church will be in 5, 10, and 20 years?" By the end of that time together last week, we

were thinking and feeling all kinds of ways—carrying the names and the memories and the burden and the discernment together. And then we learned about the shooting at the FBC of Sutherland Springs, Texas. In those next days, we named our fear of violence here in this place as well as our grief and exhaustion over an unhealthy relationship to guns in our country. And before we could even catch our breath to process, another flurry of statements hit the airwaves with sordid allegations against men in power abusing their positions to exploit women and girls. Then we rounded out the week's news with powerful heads of state (who have access to tremendous nuclear capacity) calling each other names that elementary school teachers and parents are daily attempting to teach children not to use when speaking to one another. And none of that includes what you are carrying from your own stories—decisions to be made about work and debt and children and parents and all of the unexpected twists and turns our lives take.

What questions will we ask about how we address any one of these things and all of them together? As people of faith gathered in sacred space, the best questions we ask individually and together are about how Wisdom is calling to us. How can we release our anxiety as our primary guide and become students of Wisdom—asking how Wisdom is moving, how Wisdom is calling, how Wisdom is guiding and inviting.

This morning I am tapping into some of Rob Bell's series on Wisdom¹ (this is a capital W in wisdom) as well as our third reading from The Wisdom of Solomon also called the Book of Wisdom.

In the Wisdom tradition, Wisdom is personified as a woman. In Proverbs 1:20-21 we read, "Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks." This is a strong feminine presence determined to be heard, determined to keep moving, inviting others to listen and respond. She's always talking to you. She's always calling out. She's not hidden over in a corner leaving you to walk around bumping into things in the dark. She's walking in the street.²

Teaching within this tradition is The Wisdom of Solomon or the Book of Wisdom. It appears in the Revised Common Lectionary nine times in a three year cycle, but I have never heard one of those readings in any worship service I've attended or facilitated.

¹ I am leaning heavily on Rob Bell's September 10, 2017, podcast, Wisdom: She's All Around You. I've attempted to capture quotes and cite them. For the whole thing, listen here: <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/wisdom-shes-all-around-you/>

² Phrasing from Rob Bell.

This wisdom book is not in your pew bibles because it is apocryphal—outside of our canon in that in between space written somewhere around the time of Jesus. If you have an expanded Bible like the Oxford Annotated Bible, then you will find the Book of Wisdom there. Written in Greek, its words address a Jewish audience torn between the teachings of their faith and the pull of the dominant culture around them. How do you discern the next, right move when there are so many competing stories showing turn after turn you could take. For that community, when the pull to culture is so strong, how can they possibly find guidance and relevance in their sacred story? The answer: Wisdom guides us.

As Bell teaches—The Wisdom tradition is a calm, grounded, centered way of living in which you understand Wisdom is present to you, whispering to you, inviting you. Wisdom invites us to be grounded and centered in something other than ourselves. Wisdom guides us in our responses to the circumstances of life—we have our reactions and then we have Wisdom guiding us into the next, right thing to do. I think of that as something like an urgent inhale with a mindful exhale. Our immediate reactions to circumstances are the quick, gasping inhale and holding of breath and raising of shoulders, and then Wisdom is a slow, deep, mindful exhale that changes our posture, our pulse, changes our breathing pattern, steadies our minds and prepares our responses.

In the Wisdom tradition it is assumed that life is replete with ambiguous situations; situations in which the answer is neither black nor white. There will be situations where it's not clear which choice of path is the better path. Often in churches and faith traditions, religious leaders prescribe appropriate responses in x, y, and z scenarios. "Do this but don't do that." And those types of congregations are typically really, really popular because we are carrying these gigantic baskets around with all kinds of stuff shoved in them, and we want someone to help us sort it out as quickly as possible—preferably without a lot of thinking or work on our part. However, Bell says the Wisdom tradition speaks to the reality of life that is unclear, opaque, ambiguous, fuzzy. And so Wisdom is *not* about some authority presence telling you yes or no, left or right, this way not that way. Wisdom is about listening in those moments and discerning, making the distinctions of, what is the next, right thing to do. Wisdom isn't about the cold, hard facts guiding us forward or even leaning solely on how Wisdom led 20 and 30 years ago. Wisdom is about a way of *knowing*—intuiting, discerning—what the next, right step may be.

Wisdom invites us to ask questions of life and story and our current situation and draws us into a more curious, nuanced way forward because we don't solely look at the data and make a well-reasoned choice based on what makes sense on paper. In fact, what

makes sense on paper may be the exact opposite of how Wisdom is leading. And so the tradition invites us to question and listen (both within our selves and of everyone who crosses our path) because a lot of the time you are one or two questions away from very interesting, fascinating things. But we just skip right on by the possibilities of what may be because we so badly want to get to the problem solving, solution phase in every part of our lives.

The Wisdom tradition challenges our assumptions about the world around us. Wisdom teaches us we will react to life situations as humans do (that's the quick, first gasp of an inhale), but then the Wise return to life situations and ask questions as Wisdom teaches us (slow, purposeful exhale). Wisdom teaches us to listen, to receive instruction, to tap into our accumulated prudence and learn from it and then apply it to our next opportunity. We are invited to listen to Wisdom because she is always speaking to us. Bell says, "In every situation, obviously, you respond however is natural to respond, but *then* your radar goes up, your ears are open, and you tilt your head in the direction of Wisdom because you know She's saying something to you. She's gotta be speaking. She's always talking." Even if we don't know what the next, right step is in our situation, Wisdom teaches us we have choices in how we even approach the situation. We can attempt to do things the way we've always done things—whether that's fear, denial, or sheer will and determination to push through any situation. Or we can approach life with curiosity and good questions. We look at the challenges before us and ask ourselves, "I wonder what I'm going to learn in this? I wonder what Wisdom will be hiding in the midst of this thing?"

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.
One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.
To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,
and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care,
because she goes about seeking those worthy of her,
and she graciously appears to them in their paths,
and meets them in every thought.

The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction,
and concern for instruction is love of her,
and love of her is the keeping of her laws,

and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality,
and immortality brings one near to God;
so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.

The Wisdom tradition is about each of us owning our own path and owning our own accumulation of Wisdom—the more we listen and access, the more we learn and grow; and then the distance between that first gasp and the mindful exhale shrinks. This is an energetic posture shift from passivity to curiosity. Even if the situation is familiar, and we say to ourselves, “Oh, we’ve been here before,” the call of Wisdom invites us to simultaneously tap into all we have learned and accumulated while recognizing that each life scenario requires new wisdom, new knowledge, new understanding. We stand in the new and the old at once.

Wisdom will draw us more fully onto the path of God. Wisdom will invite us more robustly into the peace-making work of Christ. Wisdom will guide and move like Spirit wind blows. She is all around you. She is moving and speaking. Whatever you are carrying, whatever we are considering together, may we seek Wisdom first, trust Wisdom is waiting to be found, listen for her with curiosity and learn from her as a student, and then may we follow where Wisdom leads. Amen.