

October 18, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

The Wisdom of Solomon

Proverbs 1:1-7; Ecclesiastes 1

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This is now the sixth sermon in a series of messages we've been preaching on the story before the grand story. We've been taking a journey through the Old Testament noticing the people, the heroes, and the great events that appear in those texts that prepare us for the grand story. Last week we considered David. David is the King. He was a poet, nation builder and warrior. He reigned for 40 years. His son was Solomon, who became king after his father's death, and he reigned also for 40 years.

If you look at the biblical texts, as they narrate Solomon's life, there are two things that he's noted for primarily. First, was his wealth. Whole chapters of 2 Chronicles are devoted to his wealth. If there was a Forbes' List in his century, he would be near the very top of that list. Listen to this from 2 Chronicles,

Solomon gathered together chariots and horses. He had 4,000 stalls for horses and chariots and 12,000 horses, which he stationed in chariot cities, and also they were with the king in Jerusalem. He made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as sycamores. Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt, and the king's trader received them, and paid the prevailing price. (2 Chronicles 9:25-28)

And The Chronicler even notes the price paid. "They imported them, and paid 600 shekels of silver, and the horse for 150. Solomon decided to build a temple for himself in the name of the Lord and a royal palace for himself. He conscripted 70,000 laborers and 8,000 stone cutters in the hill country

and 3,600 to oversee them” (2 Chronicles 2:1-2). On and on the texts record his wealth, and tell about his two great achievements: first, the building of the temple, Solomon’s Temple. David didn’t build the temple. David made the money. Solomon spent it. There were other leaders that have had that experience too. David was the warrior king, who created the kingdom, and Solomon built the temple, Solomon’s Temple. Remember our Lord made a reference to Solomon, he said, “Solomon in all his glory is not arrayed like one lily” (Matthew 6:29), but still Solomon had a lot of glory.

The irony is that this temple is destroyed in 586 B.C., a hundred years later, by the Babylonians, actually to the very ground, so that to this day nothing remains from Solomon’s Temple. In fact, the Wailing Wall, which is the Western Wall with the vast stones of the Temple of Jerusalem in Jerusalem today are not from Solomon’s Temple; they’re from Herod’s Temple built in the first century. So Solomon built a great temple, and a luxurious palace. For these projects he probably shouldn’t have bought those horses from Egypt because the Egyptians realized how much he paid for them, and they came up just a few years after he died, and literally, with even more chariots, stripped Jerusalem of every bit of his gold and silver.

The gold and silver only lasted for a few years, and maybe Solomon himself received hints of that happening toward the end of his life because within a few years, everything was taken away. Remember I said last week there’s a brief moment of glory in Jewish history. It’s David and Solomon, and then it’s basically downhill from there on. That is one of the dangers of extravagant living that’s out in the open so that everybody can see your riches because others now want it.

Solomon is also noted for his wisdom, and perhaps the wisdom came nearer the end of his life. I think it probably did. And he wrote two books for which we are grateful, books about wisdom. One is the Ecclesiastes, and the Ecclesiastes is credited to Solomon. Listen how Ecclesiastes begins (the word *ecclesiastes* means “preacher”).

So it starts, “The words of the teacher or the preacher, the Son of David, King of Jerusalem.” That’s Solomon. “Vanity of vanities says the Teacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What do the people gain from all the toil where they toil under the sun? A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” The sun rises, the sun goes down. It rehearses and plays where it rises. The wind blows to the north, the wind blows to the south” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-6). That’s the way the book of Ecclesiastes be-

gins. Not exactly a cheerful beginning to a book. Are you sure you want to read any further in that book? It's a book about vanity. By the way, I have to offer a word study: the word for "vanity" used here is not the word used in Exodus, chapter 20, in the Third Commandment where we are warned, "Do not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain." That word "vain" in Exodus is the Hebrew word, which means "hollow."

And so in the Ten Commandments we were warned not to hollow the name of the Lord, but that word is not the word used here. The word used here, translated "vanity" in your English text is the word "vapor," "mist" and that's different. That's different than 'hollow.' Solomon doesn't start the book of Ecclesiastes saying, "Hollow, hollow, hollow, everything's hollow." He doesn't say that. He would really then be a total cynic, if he said that. He said, 'I've had all this wealth,' (in fact, the book is about his wealth and how it didn't work to produce happiness or fulfillment); but still he doesn't say "Hollow, hollow, hollow." He says, "Vapor, vapor, vapor." It means it was here, it's real, but it doesn't last long. That's different than 'hollow.' 'Hollow' means there's nothing there. Oh, no, wealth is there. All these experiences of wealth or poverty for that matter are there; it's just that they don't last forever.

Pascal probably had this in mind when he said, "Nothing stays put for us."¹ It's contrary to our inclination, but nevertheless that's the way it is. Nothing stays put. So that's the way Solomon begins the book of Ecclesiastes, "Nothing stays put." There is a kind of driftedness about life. And that will help you understand the most famous passage in Ecclesiastes, which is chapter 3, which begins with the word, "seasons," and now you can understand what he meant by seasons. Seasons are like vapor. Seasons are like mist. We never have summer all the time. We never have winter all the time. We never have spring all the time. It comes and it goes. And so the most famous passage in Ecclesiastes starts with this word "seasons:"

For everything there is a season. And a time for everything under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill, a time to heal. A time to break down, a time to build up. A time to weep, a time to laugh. A time to mourn, a time to dance. A time to throw away stones, a time to gather stones. A time to embrace, a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek, a time to lose. A time to keep, a time to throw away. A time to tear, a time to sew. A time to keep silent, and a time to speak. A time to love, a time to hate,"

and I'm so grateful for the last strophe of this poem:

A time for war, but a time for peace.

And then a very amazing passage follows that Solomon writes:

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable.
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-11)

By the way, the word here means “just right.” God has made everything just right. The seasons are just right, even the vapor is just right. “I’ve seen that God has made everything suitable or just right for its time. Moreover,” and here’s the most mysterious line of all, “Moreover, he has put a sense of past and future in everyone’s mind” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and that may be the riddle that he’ll talk about later in Proverbs. He’s put a sense of past and future in everybody’s mind. We always have a sense of our history, of our tradition, but also the future, the mystery of the future in our mind. And then this important sentence: “Yet we cannot figure it out,” he says, “but God knows the beginning from the end.” At the very end of the book of Ecclesiastes, after going through all of his life, and saying how everything is really like mist, at the end he says, “But God keeps track of it all” (Ecclesiastes 12:14). Well, that’s the book of Ecclesiastes.

Some people say of Ecclesiastes, “Ah, it’s a cynical book,” but when we try to understand the mystery lines that are in Ecclesiastes we know it is more. The big question that Ecclesiastes raises is: How do you live in the mist? How do you live in the vapor? How do we make sense out of life in the face of its seasons? C.S. Lewis has a famous line, “You know, 100 percent of us die, and nothing can change the percentage.”² But we are alive now, we’re here. How do we make sense of why we’re here? The book that seeks to answer that question is Solomon’s best book, the book of Proverbs.

It becomes a very important book for the New Testament; our Lord, quotes it several times. James, when he wrote his book, actually models his book on the book of Proverbs. His is a book of advice, as Proverbs is a book of advice. The Sermon on the Mount that our Lord taught is very much like Proverbs. There are epigrams, sayings, and then little parables that go with it, very much like the book of Proverbs. The key word in the book of Proverbs is the word “wisdom.” The book begins this way,

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young - let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance - for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

And then especially note the great line at the end of chapter 1, verse 7:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of wisdom.

The word “wisdom” in Hebrew means “skill.” It’s the skill of knowing how to sail a sailboat when the winds are conflicted. It’s the skill you learn from book knowledge, that you learn from your parents. ‘Listen to your mother and your father,’ they’ll help you with wisdom. It’s the skill you learn that shows that you need to be in good physical and mental condition if you’re going to play football into the third or fourth quarter of a game. And by the way, most teams that seem to have a bad experience, have a bad experience in the fourth quarter because they run out of steam.

They didn’t have the wisdom. They weren’t shrewd enough to know they really had to be in condition to play in the third and fourth quarter of a football game because after all, no one remembers halftime scores. Can any of you think of the halftime score of any game you just saw? You only remember the last score. Therefore if you’re wise, you need to be ready for the fourth quarter. If you’re wise, you will know how to handle yourself when you’re tempted to do wrong things. And in fact, that’s how the Proverbs begins; it begins with a parable. In fact, it says, “You should have skill in knowing how to understand the riddles or the parables” (Proverbs 1:6). And our Lord, of course, used parables in his teaching, and everyone is agreed that in this he was influenced by the book of Proverbs.

Here, let’s notice how verse 8 goes on, “Hear my child, your father’s instruction, and don’t reject your mother’s teaching. They’re like fair garland for your head, they’re a pendant for your neck, my child.” And now comes the parable, “If sinners entice you, don’t consent. And if they say,” and now we hear a little story, a scary little story that the Proverbs begin with. “If they say, ‘Hey, Jim, come with us, let us lie in wait for blood. Let us wantonly ambush the innocent.’ ” By the way, an ancient ambush in the first century was that robbers, marauders would make a net over a pit, and they would disguise the net with leaves, so you think it’s part of the ground, and then an animal would walk over the net, fall through it, and then you could kill the animal, or a person, in this case; some innocent person would walk across the net, fall through it, then you’ll kill him, and take all his money, and you’ll be rich. Now, that’s what the parable’s about. Listen to it.

“Hey, Jim, come with us, let us lie in wait for blood. Let us wantonly ambush an innocent guy, and like Sheol,” (that’s the place of death) “it will swallow him alive and whole. And then he’ll go down in the pit, and we’ll find all kinds of costly things, and we’ll fill our houses with booty.” And

then here comes the promise that all robbers make, but seldom do they keep, "And throw in your lot with us, Jim, and we'll have just one purse equally shared." Don't believe that. Don't join the Mafia; it'll never be one purse equally shared, except for shared guilt.

"My child," now, that's the end of the parable, and here the father and mother are giving advice to their son, daughter, "My child, do not walk in their way. Keep your foot from their paths for their feet are running to do evil, and they are hurrying to shed blood." And then comes a little P.S. to the parable, "And by the way, while they're making their net, the bird is watching, and guess what, they'll fall in the net themselves" (Proverbs 1:10-18). That's how the parable ends. What a surprise! So while they lie in wait, they end up killing themselves because they set an ambush for their own lives. The proverb is saying that if you're addicted to evil, you will end up being devoured by evil. If you're doing insider trading, it'll eventually devour you. If it is not stockholders catching up with you, it's the S.E.C. that will find you out.

"Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain." And by the way, this is written by Solomon. He knows this is true. He was greedy during his life. Solomon did a lot of bad things. And now at the end of his life, he became wise. "Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain, it takes away the life of the possessor" (Proverbs 1:19). Well, that's the first of the parables in Proverbs. And you can see in this wonderful tradition of parables, of riddles that are told, and that we are to learn from: we learn from these we are meant to gain wisdom, to gain skill that'll help make our way through complicated terrain where we are tempted to distort, or tempted to abandon the truth, and wantonly kill innocent people for our own gain.

Now, where does this skill come from? Where do we find this wisdom, so that we don't find ourselves tempted to go in that direction? Let me make three reflections. First, we find wisdom, as verse 7 says, by focusing our eyes as we worship the one true God. Clearly focus on what is at the center, clearly see what deserves to have our full attention, not these marauders, who are around tempting us, but God himself. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." That great line from Proverbs is describing reverence toward the Lord of all truth. Focus your mind on what is true, open your mind and worship the truth of God from the Law and the Gospel.

And then the second admonition: listen to the people of your life, who are trustworthy, as they give you advice about what is good and true; and so

that's the beginning. We find wisdom by focusing on what is true. That hasn't changed. It's wise counsel whether you're doing physical conditioning or whether you're studying for the bar exam or whether you're studying to become a doctor, focus on the truth, and that's how we get wisdom. I don't want somebody who cheated in a medical school surgery exam to do surgery on me, I'll tell you that. I don't want somebody who borrowed somebody else's midterm paper to represent me in court. I want somebody who was committed to truth, and that gave them wisdom.

Secondly, "experience the wisdom in your own life", and that is the most famous of all the texts in Proverbs. It's in the third chapter, where Solomon says, "Do not let loyalty or faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck, and mark them on the tablets of your heart, and then you'll find favor with God" (Proverbs 3:3-4). Then comes the most beloved verse in all of Proverbs, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will make straight your path." (Proverbs 3:5-6). So many people have written that sentence in their Bible. You and I should too. Trust in the Lord; live in the faithfulness of God. Experience his Good News. Experience his love that will give to us a resource when we are tempted. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths from the inside out.

And then finally, dare to go straight. Dare to do what you know is true. That's why the Proverbs are the beginning of discipleship teaching, which we will later see in the book of James, and in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the New Testament letters. This is how our lives grow in discipleship: what you've learned; what you've seen; what your parents taught you that was trustworthy; what you learned from trustworthy people; what you saw when you worshipped God, and when you discovered Christ's love in your heart, now do it. Saint Paul said this in Philippians chapter 4, "What you've seen and heard, do it." The word he uses for "do it," is the word *praxis*, put what you learned put into practice. And he promises that God's validation comes to us within the doing.

This afternoon here at National Presbyterian Church we will have an All-Church supper to highlight urban mission and ministries here in Washington, DC that people in this congregation are committed to and are involved in -- in which men and women and youth are daring to put faith into practice. The results are good, both for the ministries that benefit from caring folk, and also very good for those who care.

This skill called “wisdom” in the book of Proverbs is really the first beginning of the sanctification teaching in the Bible; but best of all it also stirs us up to want to know the Skill Giver, God himself. Can you see how this is the story before the grand story? Bonhoeffer once said, “We need to hear the next to the last word before we can hear the last word.”³ And this wonderful next to the last word in Proverbs prepares each of us to want to hear the last word.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this great text. How it draws us to you, how it gives us good advice. It comes from a man who made mistakes; and yet, he became wise. Fortunately, he became wise just in time, and wrote these wonderful words for us. Lord, may we hear them and enjoy the Lord, who gives us grace, and strength. And then may we seek to do his will. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

1 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensees*. Hackett Publishing Company (English edition), 2005.

2 Lewis, C.S. *Learning in Wartime* (speech from Autumn 1939).

3 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. MacMillan, 1953.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 & 11 a.m.

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