

# The Beginning of Wisdom

August 18, 2024

Psalm 34:9-14  
Ephesians 5:15-20

I haven't looked at my sermons over the last few years, but it seems to me that I tend to preach more somber sermons just before I got on vacation, and more cheerful sermons when I come back from them. Well, here I am, just back from vacation. So what am I thinking about?

Wisdom. You know. The fear of the LORD.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." We spoke that together during the Prayer of Invocation this morning, and the phrase "the fear of the LORD" showed up as well in Psalm 34.

What do you think? Should I have taken a longer vacation?

To reflect on wisdom, I've got the assistance of the letter to the Ephesians, which has such cheerful advice as to be wise, not foolish (and recognizes that foolishness is frequently more fun); not to get drunk with wine; and to make the most of the time, "because the days are evil."

Perhaps the Apostle should have taken a vacation as well.

Frequently in the letters of the Apostle Paul, he provided us with a list of things to avoid. Curiously, though, there's only one here: don't drink to excess. That was good advice in the first century and it's good advice today. I admit that it's a bit simplistic. "Just say no" sounds good, but it fails to account for the power of addictive substances and behaviors over human beings.

But... where's the rest of the list?

In fact, there's only one other item on the list, and it's not a "do not do," it's a "please do" item. What is wisdom? To be filled with the Spirit, and to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to the Lord in your hearts, and giving thanks to God.

You know, that sounds almost... cheerful.

As novelist Paul Coelho wrote, "The simple things are also the most extraordinary things, and only the wise can see them."

That verse from Psalm 111 is the one that sticks in our memory, isn't it? "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." A lot of people aren't fond of that verse, even if they do remember

it. It's not a cheerful verse. We don't like fear. It feels bad. And in a church like ours, where our theology guides us to a more positive feeling about God, it feels wrong.

Which is something of a pity, because fear is such a handy emotion. It is, literally, life-saving. The fear response in the human body allows for quicker response to encounters with danger. Fear sometimes – not always – prevents people from entering dangerous situations. Fear sometimes – not always – prevents people from doing things because they fear the consequences. Honestly, it's a pretty useful human characteristic.

Still, you don't want to think about people around you as people to fear. You don't want to fear people who love you.

Except that... I know I fear disappointing the people I love. I still do it, I'm afraid, but I fear it and that fear prevents me from disappointing them more often. And I fear disappointing God.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

But it is not the fullness of wisdom. Because the Apostle, who I'm quite certain knew Psalm 111 backwards, forwards, upside down and sideways, utterly failed to go there when talking about what constitutes wisdom versus what constitutes foolishness. Even in a world which is evil, said the Apostle, wisdom is celebration. Wisdom is thanksgiving. Wisdom is singing.

As Sally A. Brown writes at Working Preacher, "Gratitude to the God who has become one of us—accompanying us even amid oppression, pain, isolation, and grief—is an act of holy defiance against all the forces, seen and unseen, that conspire to crush our faith and our hope."

During my vacation I did a lot of traveling. I flew about 5,000 miles, then I drove to eight cities in four states. That's a lot of driving for someone who rarely takes a trip longer than eighty miles. It's also something I probably can't sustain as the years advance.

Exhausting.

But.

I saw people I love and care about. I heard their voices. I heard their stories. We shared meals and laughter and hugs. And a few of the obligatory self-portraits.

Exhilarating.

So what is wisdom, and what is folly? To give my attention to the exhausting elements of my time away, or to give it to the exhilaration? Ephesians is clear: Wisdom is celebration. Wisdom is thanksgiving. Wisdom is singing.

I guess I'll focus on the love and the stories and, of course, the obligatory self-portraits.

None of that means that the difficult things didn't happen, or weren't difficult. It doesn't even mean that they were "worth it," however anyone wants to think of that. The Apostle said the times were evil and it might have been one of the more obvious things to say about the world in which he lived. It's a pretty obvious thing to say about the world in which we live.

But it is not the only thing to say about the world in which we live. We believe that God pronounced this Creation "good," even "very good." If we set our minds solely on the evils of this world then we commit the folly of appreciating the profound gift of God in Creation, in humanity, in our own lives. Some of ancient Israel's neighbors had religions that believed the world to be a sort of cosmic accident at best, or the work of a malign deity at worst. In the first century, Gnosticism held that Creation imprisoned free spirits.

Judaism and Christianity following it rejected both ideas. The universe is a beautiful, sacred place, created by a loving God for the life and joy of those who live in it. We are not just accidents of fate. We are the image of God.

That's a foundation of wisdom.

The Apostle knew as well that the news of Jesus' death and resurrection was and is and will always be good news. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved. When so many religions demanded sacrifice on the part of worshipers to their gods, Christianity celebrated the sacrifice of its God on behalf of human beings. The very word "gospel" is Greek for "good news."

When someone gives you good news, what do you say? Me, I say, "Thank you."

The Dutch theologian Meister Eckhart wrote, "If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough."

Mahalo nui loa, ke Akua.

Melissa Bane Sevier, writing in her blog, reflects on our culture's demands for efficiency. "When the apostle writes that 'the days are evil,' I take that to mean that day upon day upon day can be evil if we don't redeem the time. Sameness, boredom, work, heaviness, laboriousness. We redeem the time by filling it with things that give life to us and the people around us. Yes, sometimes that involves being efficient.

"But I'm also reminded that making the most of our time often means an efficiency of the spirit, which might be a far notion from checking off lists.

"How will you make the most of your time today?"

"I'm planning to eat supper on the porch."

Personally, I'm planning to enjoy our annual picnic, with its games and conversations, with its laughter and its life. I'm also planning to enjoy a few hymns and spiritual songs this morning. I hope you will, too, even those of you who aren't enthusiastic singers. God ahead. Pray twice this morning.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, but not the only beginning. Joy in the LORD is also a beginning, and a constant companion for the journey. Look at what is around you, and not just to what is far away. Look at what is within you, and give thanks for the gifts you have received. Let your hearts, minds, and voices sing.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*