SEEKING WSDDDM

THREE-PART SERMON SERIES

A POCKETFUL OF CHANGE

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PROVERBS 1:20-33

What is a good life? Take a moment and think about it – what makes life good?

If you're drawing a blank, not to worry – philosophers and great thinkers have been proposing answers to that question for thousands of years. What's needed for a good life seems to fall roughly into three big categories. Some think that to live a good life, we have to be good and virtuous people. Others think that we need to feel good, to enjoy life's pleasures to the fullest. And still others think that a good life is an accomplished life, where we are prosperous, respected and engaged with society and the people around us.

So basically, a good life might mean being good, feeling good, or being socially and financially rewarded for doing good.

There is a set of books in the Bible that seeks to directly answer the question of what it means to live a good life: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. These three books are what's called wisdom literature, and they have kind of a different take on what a good life is like. All three books focus on the world and life as they are, and what it means to live well in God's world. Each of these books tackles the question from a unique perspective, teaching wisdom and how to live a good life from its own particular vantage point.

Imagine for a moment that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job were each people, that we could actually meet and have a conversation with. We would meet Proverbs as the brilliant young teacher; Ecclesiastes as the sharp middle-aged critic, and Job as the weathered old man who has seen a lot in his life. Each one has considerable insight into wisdom and living a good life, and how the two fit together; but Proverbs is kind of the beginner's course in God's wisdom, so we're starting there.

Proverbs begins by making it clear that this is a teaching text with a short inscription from a father to his son, encouraging him to invest himself in learning wisdom because his life will be better because of it. But before we get to the expected one-liners and riddles of wise advice, we meet wisdom herself, a woman shouting in the streets, proclaiming the need for wisdom and predicting the fate of those who reject it. It's a vivid start to a teaching manual! So let's see what brilliant young Lady Wisdom has to teach us about living wisely and well in God's world.

Let's start with getting to know our teacher – who exactly is Lady Wisdom? Although she starts to speak right at the beginning of the book, we have to skip ahead a few chapters to find the answer to that question. She is God's master craftswoman, brought into being at the beginning of reality and used by God to build that reality; she is woven into the very fabric of creation.

Before we go any further and we all get worried about where this is going, Lady Wisdom is not a real, living person or separate divine being; she's what's called a personification of an attribute of God.

It's a writing technique, and there are a lot of examples of it in poetry and literature, and also the Bible – we're just so used to most of them that we don't pick up on it anymore.

It's when a thing – an object or concept or part of God's character – is spoken of as if it were a separate person, in and of itself. All creation groans in labour pains, wrote Paul; if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, said God to Cain, right at the beginning of the Bible. Creation can't really groan like a person, any more than sin crouches like a villain in the shadows by the door. But saying so helps us learn. And here, Lady Wisdom is the wisdom of God, made into a person so we can learn about her, and from her.

The writer of Proverbs used a lot of building imagery to describe wisdom's work at creation, like a master architect; wisdom is woven into every part of reality, forms the basis and guides the shape of every part of the universe. Lady Wisdom sees that God's wisdom is the pattern for how reality works; not just stars and gravity and rainforests and oceans, but also communities and relationships, every-day decisions and choices, actions and reactions.

Wisdom sees the big picture, the inner working of it all and how everything fits together, like gears of all shapes and sizes, turning uniquely and yet together in a cause-and-effect system. And she also sees where folly throws the whole system out-of-whack.

And so, we first meet Lady Wisdom, crying out in the streets, pleading with everyone who rejects God's wisdom and trying to persuade them away from their foolish way of living. She is publicly accessible, there, in the busiest parts of the city, freely offering wisdom to all.

God's wisdom isn't meant for some secret club nor is it meant to be hidden and mysterious. We are all meant to be able to tap into the pattern of the universe, to participate in God's wisdom as it shapes reality. And yet we see that Wisdom is frustrated, because what she offers is not accepted by those who hear her.

I suspect that part of the problem is that wisdom is not just something you can know about or have; it's also something you do. The other part of the problem is that it's God's wisdom underlying reality. And God's wisdom, God's idea of a life lived wisely and well, will have a particular shape and substance to it that not everyone is going to find easy or appealing.

So how do we do it? How do we tap in and take part, how do we learn whatever it is that Wisdom is crying out to teach us?

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, according to the book of Proverbs.

The fear of God is not being scared of God, although experiencing genuine awe will feel a little overwhelming and scary sometimes. Fearing God means to have that awe, to honour God and listen to God and follow God's lead. It means reverence and respect and loyalty to God. And that is the beginning of learning to see and know and do God's wisdom ourselves.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs are all speeches about God, about Wisdom and the need for it, and about the parent – child encouragement to learn. Then there's twenty-some chapters full of actual proverbs: short sayings, brief scenarios, even riddles. These proverbs aren't life hacks; they're not shortcuts to success or advice column answers to life's problems. I mean, you could read them like that, if you wanted to. But if you're not looking for God's wisdom under the proverb, it's all too easy to skew wise advice away from God's vision of a good life and toward our own definition, whether that's being a decently moral human being, enjoying life's pleasures or reaping ego-stroking rewards from the world.

Let me give you an example. One of the first proverbs in Proverbs is "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth."

Sounds straightforward enough: work hard and steady, and you'll be financially successful and secure. Don't work, you won't earn, and you won't be wealthy.

But what makes Lady Wisdom wise is not a good memory for the 375-ish proverbs in the book. What makes her wise and a good teacher is that she's always looking for God's wisdom underlying every situation she encounters so she can do wisdom, applying God's vision of reality in the right way to every decision or action or thought she has.

What if we read that proverb about diligent hands bringing wealth, and decided that wealth was the most important part of it? What if we worked hard and used our business skills, and maybe cut some corners, to make sure of that wealth? What if we treat our employees badly, by underpaying them or not keeping the work environment safe? We'd be driving them into poverty, no matter how diligently they worked, and hurting them physically, too, in the long run. And we might tuck a little of that wealth away somewhere, where it can't be taxed, and then make a show of donating to charity, so we'd look good and have a tax write-off.

We'd still be working diligently and we'd be getting wealthy; people would probably think well of us and we'd have every sign and symbol of success imaginable...but we would be very far from tapping into the wisdom of God and living a good life that makes life better for all.

Instead, Lady Wisdom would encourage us to look for the pattern under the proverb, and discover that working diligently, having meaningful work and a purpose, brings its own kind of wealth, wealth that drives out unhealthy laziness, wealth that can be used generously to care

for the vulnerable and take care of those who depend upon us, wealth that makes life good for all. A different kind of good than we might have imagined at first; but a good that leads toward God, and cooperates with God's plans and purposes for reality.

Proverbs is full of puzzling, punchy sayings like that, road-tested insight into the world as it is, and a nudge toward working out what to do ourselves in that situation. They point out the pattern, the cause-and-effect system of decision and outcome, and then let the student learn to understand and act in tune with the wisdom that God's woven into the fabric of his creation. From there, we use what we've learned when we encounter a new situation...it's all about teaching us how to apply wisdom until it's instinct; until we've been shaped by it, as part of our relationship with God.

I don't know that we always think about "the wisdom of God" as being quite so practical as this. But Proverbs really is a kind of training manual for wisdom, for learning to exercise good judgement and becoming capable of self-discernment when it comes to our motivations and our own definition of a good life, well-lived.

Do you remember way back when we first introduced loonies, and then later toonies, into the Canadian currency system? We went from having little change purses with dimes and quarters to heavy masses of metal in our pockets and handbags. Who knew it was possible to have twenty bucks in change in your wallet! These days, as you know, we've got five different types of coins here in Canada; but if I'm being honest, I very rarely bother making change at the store when I'm shopping and haven't for years – it's all about the swipe or the tap. But when I used to travel to other countries, though, it's there that I found myself using cash more often and having to make sense of the coinage. Easy enough in the States – only four coins there, although all of the bills look the same, which is tricky of them.

But head over to Europe, and that's when life starts getting complicated! You've got eight different coins to the euro, and nine different coins to the British pound. I promise you, there's nothing quite so awkward and embarrassingly foreign-feeling as trying to pay for your coffee on the way to work at 8am in the morning, with a long line-up behind you, and having to look at every single coin in your pocket to figure out which ones to hand over! It took some time for it become as instinctive as loonies and toonies and nickels and dimes.

Learning God's wisdom is like having a pocketful of change; Proverbs is familiarising ourselves with the system of currency so we can pull out and use that wisdom, quick as you like, at the right moment and in the right way.

But all that said, Proverbs does present things in a kind of over-shiny, rose-tinted way. If you start with a sense of awe and reverence for God, learn to understand the wisdom that's woven into creation, and then practice applying it in your daily life, you'll be healthy, wealthy and wise. There's not a lot of room there for shades of grey, for complex situations, for a good life, wisely lived, that has some rough stretches in it, too. But when you're teaching someone something new and challenging, very often you do start with the basic principles, and encourage your new student by extolling the benefits of their course of study.

Fortunately, Proverbs is only the beginning of what the Bible has to teach us about God's wisdom. And if we do live with God's wisdom as both knowledge and skill, if we apply that wisdom as best we can to every situation and decision we face, we and everyone around us will on balance benefit from it, and our lives will, in the end, be good. Thanks be to God! Amen.