

Haydenville Congregational Church, Haydenville MA
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“The Beginning of Wisdom”

Psalm 111/ Proverbs 9, 1-16, 1 Kings, 3:5-14

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight
O God, our rock and our redeemer.*

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

For quite some time, I was not fond of that phrase, and I grouped it with a pile of things from the bible you might call “*things to ignore because they just are not relevant or otherwise they are too distasteful to ever think about let alone preach on.*”

Things like wives submit to your husbands, do not eat a goat boiled in its mothers milk, and so on...

For a generation x, or generation W or whatever I am feminist born at the end of the 60’s, the idea of being afraid is not especially compelling, and the idea of being afraid of God was always particularly distasteful.

I was, and am, interested in an all loving, all forgiving God, not one who makes me shudder, cower, or fear punishment.

But one night, a few years ago, I had a dream, and in the morning woke up with this line of scripture in my head “*the fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” And while I believe in a still speaking God, and while I believe that scripture is the stories, history, myths, laws and narratives of living people, trying, just as we are, to hear and discern the word of God,

If I wake up with a line of scripture ringing in my ears
You better believe I pay attention.

I dreamt about fording a stream.... Those of you who have been backpacking or hiking in the words know that streams are part of the territory; they meander and flow, as they will, up and over mountains

And sometimes a trail must cross right over them.

I dreamt of a time when, as a young person, a friend and I forded a stream with a higher current than we were aware of from the perspective of the banks.

The water was high. But the stream looked inviting, its mountain water bubbling and gushing over stones.

We decided to cross where it was deep, and, to make a long story short, so to speak, we ended up needing help fishing ourselves out with inner tubes from swimmers nearby who had stopped at a calmer, deeper place to enjoy the water.

Obviously I survived the incident...In my dream I did not have that exuberant sense of abandon that I had that led to the stream crossing I just described, but yet, nor did I have instead a captious, careful crossing of the stream, with a big walking stick and careful measured steps...Instead I dreamt I was flying, above the stream yet in it, flowing and swimming all at once...I knew the stream and it knew me, I was exploring both its eddies and its dangerous places...

Dreams, as we know, often tell us things in very weird, often indecipherable language...

Often they do not seem to tell us anything at all but rather offer us babbling nonsense.

But as I said, I woke up from *this* dream with that line ringing in my head; the fear of the Lord is the beginning in of wisdom.

I assumed upon waking that I must have heard the phrase somewhere along the way for it to have turned up in my dream, but I did not know where. I found after doing some research that

The phrase “fear of the lord” is in the scripture many times, and the phrase “The fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom” is found in the book of proverbs, as well as in psalm 111 that we read today.

In my inquires, eager as I was to find a description of fear that would not suggest that my dream was telling me that I should cowering a corner or that God was terrifying—not something I was interested in discovering--

I did in fact find

That in Hebrew—the language in which this poetry was originally written, as far as we know—the word fear has a slightly different meaning.

It does not mean to cower and shake, quite, but it means to show awe and respect.

What is more, in Hebrew, as far as my research seemed to suggest,

Fear has a more active quality than the English word, to fear.

In English, fear is a noun that describes a state of mind, an experience of an emotion. In Hebrew fear is an action—it flows from out us

In response to something that elicits utter awe and humility—

We are so awed that we are, not paralyzed, as might be the assumption

But motivated to some sort of responsive action

In the face of what is so awesome and tremendous.

Furthermore, as is often the case in the translation, from Hebrew to English the order of words is changed

So in fact, what may have been meant was *not the fear of God, by people*
But *the fear of god, in other words, gods fear*. But since we know that God is not afraid, himself, how we then read the passage may be something like this—
the awe that God has invokes in us and the way we then act when we are awed
Is the beginning
Of wisdom.

So maybe we can rest assured that God is not meant to scare us, to threaten us or elicit trepidation or terror, or at least God is not meant to do only this.

For the translation of the Hebrew word fear

Is not simply awe and reverence that we feel standing still

It is a behavior, a cultivation of certain ways of thinking and feeling and being in this life through which we begin to get wisdom---

For it turns out, that just as fear is not a static state of mind

That grips us and then immobilizes us

Or, by contrast causes us to lash out without forethought
wisdom

Is a process---Is not bestowed and then held onto

Like a jewels in a treasure chest.

Wisdom is not possessed or gained

It is not still or compact or indifferent.

Joan Chittister, nun, writer, lecturer and peace activist

Says, contrary to how we have sometimes interpreted scriptures, what they really mean to tell us is that wisdom is not life wrapped in marshmallow...

Wisdom is not the fine art of serene oblivions. Wisdom is life peeled and cored, it is the peak of consciousness and attention...it is not apathy masquerading as patience.

Wisdom, says Chittister, is not a gift, it is a task.

Perhaps that gives us a clue as to why wisdom

Is so often personified in the Bible and in ancient religion in general.

In the proverb that Donique read to us today

Wisdom is a builder

A Connie fender or a Kenny Nichols

A Sue Carbin or a Lynn Fogg.

She builds a house and hews seven pillars, she gets dinner ready
And then gathers a group of her protégés at her table and says
In effect
Grow up and listen.

So perhaps, I'm sorry to say, we may need to feel just a little fear
After all.

Wisdom is personified as a woman, throughout proverbs
And in other places as the bible as well
Furthermore, in fact
There are texts that have been discovered in which Jesus himself
Has been described as wisdom personified
Associated with the feminine Archetype Of wisdom.
Because of the very male dominated culture of most of the scriptures that were
canonized into the Bible
Scholars have often wondered why exactly this is the case.

One possible interpretation
Is that in the ancient world
Women
Were always doing manual labor
Cooking, cleaning and raising children
And while men of course did manual labor too
There was the world of study and conversation
Negotiation and talk.
Thus wisdom, far from being held by a sage who sits on top of a mountain
And dispenses it to those willing to make the hike,
Is process, it is action, it is the way we learn from what we do
Day after day after day.
And being willing to learn from what life has to teach us
Time after time.
So ironically, in some ways,
Wisdom is the willingness to be afraid...
For we have to look at the past and be willing to take what we have learned
In order to confront the future
And sometimes that is very scary indeed....

Wisdom, Joan Chittester says, *does not let us alone. It does not settle. is a
commitment to go on, always open, always learning what life is really about for*

em now, if everyhing I am and are eman to be is ever to be developed before I die... ”

She says, if we repsond to wisdom , we will always change,gwon and deepen, and come to new menaings, new learnings, new moments, new ways of ebign alive. Because soemthyign in our past challnged us and soemthing in our present changed us and soemthign within us prods uis towarded whayever are unknwon dfutures are.

As time goes by wisdom teaches us that—life is a porcess, noit a place, and wisdom is the activity that takes us through.
To always be going forward looking at the losses, at the embarrasewmnts, the greifs, thef ailures, the dissapointments—this is frightening indeed.
Like the work of women in the anctity world
It is repertive and consatnt.
It is muscular and determoined.
It is threatenign and tiring.

It is also the way
To a good life.

So we know now wisdom is not just about learning or even age, thought that helpss.It is not about educiton.Or even neccessarily breadth of experience.
It is the activity we undertake in the face of awe
It is the action we committ to in order that we might resapond to the prod deep whtin us That is God herself...

You may still not know that wisdom is, exactly
I don't either--
But it seems clear that It is the oppsite of denial
The oppsite of lying to ourselves
The oppsite of claiming
That we are never afraid.

For the fear of the lord
Is its beginnging...

As I think of we hope and wish for--
Health and healingfor each other

Recover for those who are ill
And a peaceful passing for those who will not recover their health and strength
For a more equitable world, for the care and stewardship of our planet
For enjoyment of the earth, for true laughter and mirth at the situation we all
find ourselves in
I think of all of you and
I see wisdom all around and before me.

I think that through our hopes and our hardships
Our suffering and our prayers
That we are all committed
To the cultivation of this wisdom
The dedication to hear her as she calls us forward
We are called to cultivate this as we do our gardens
With patience and devotion and, given the unpredictability of the new England
Often fear.

I think of how we listen to dreams
That make no sense because there is no clear answer
No yes or no. No “be more careful” or “just dive right in”
But instead mystical imagery, Where we fly and swim, all at the same time.

Indeed, wisdom can be a bit dangerous.
But it wants us to live all the life we were meant to live.
So it is worth the risk.
Wisdom is not caution, but nor is it abandon
It is something mysterious and complex in between
That must be deciphered
In each situation time after time after time...
Chittesder says life is a series of ongoing changes bred by the demands of our
personal present, and nourished by a faithful past for the sake of a faithful
future. All of us who find the beginnings of wisdom are meeting these
challenges in order to come to what is, for us, the fullness of life.

So friends, may you have the courage to be afraid.
May you cultivate wisdom—May you see wisdom, which is always, in this life,
beginning. May she be the wind at your back, may she push and challenge you, may
she comfort and keep you
As her own.
Amen.