

“The Place of Understanding”

Proverbs 3:5-8; Job 28:20-28 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 14, 2021

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might loosen our grip just a bit
and dare to trust in your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

“Where is the place of understanding?” Job asks, and then pretty much admits he doesn’t know, nobody but God knows, and we’re never going to know. I don’t know where the place of understanding is either, but I’m certain it’s nowhere we’ve been in the last year. One of things that’s been so hard over the past year is how much uncertainty we’ve had to navigate. It turns out we don’t like not understanding what is going on. So as we turn to understanding as a part of endurance, in our six-week Lenten effort to ENDURE, we must look at what the Bible tells us about wisdom and knowledge.

One of the insights I found most interesting in our readings today is the implication in the verses we heard from Proverbs that what happens with our minds is connected to our bodies. The first three verses are talking about choices we can make in our brains and our hearts about whose knowledge and wisdom to rely on; but then the last verse reminds us of the rewards if we get that right: “It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.” Not a soothing balm for your soul or a comforting peace for your worried heart or anxious mind, but a healing refreshment for your flesh and body. I think our lived experience assures us of the

truth of this mind-body connection, but much of the rhetoric of our culture pressures us to downplay the relationship between our thoughts and feelings and the physical state of our bodies. In the midst of a pandemic that both causes anxiety in our minds and hearts and has the potential to bring illness to our bodies, we cannot afford to ignore this dynamic.

Beyond this recognition of the mind-body connection, the passages we read today echo the primary message about wisdom that is found throughout scripture: that wisdom is rooted in “the fear of the Lord” and we should pursue that rather than relying on our own insight. We will come back to the “fear of the Lord” part in a moment, but first let’s name some of the ways we’ve tried to rely on our own insight in the past year. You’ve heard me say that the pandemic has both felt like an apocalypse, in the end-of-the-world sense, and actually been an apocalypse, in the “revelation” sense of the word; that is, that everything that’s happened has revealed a lot that we either didn’t know or that we could more easily ignore before. One of the things that has been revealed is how thin and fragile human wisdom is.

We may take solace in the fact that we live in a scientific age. When we compare ourselves to people from Bible times, we can rightfully claim to know a lot more about the way the world works. We may think we’ve evolved past their explanations of wisdom and their cautions about arrogant dependence on our own knowledge. But if this year has shown us anything it’s that we’re not very good at learning science in real time. COVID-19 is a very complex illness; scientists are still

working to understand it and probably will be for decades to come. And while the rest of us may have a cursory comprehension of the scientific method, we have not responded well to the ever-changing lists of risks and recommended precautionary measures and symptoms and potential treatments and possible long-term effects. For many, adjustments to the original hypotheses have created distrust in the whole enterprise, even though that is exactly how good science works. Some have chosen to err on the side of being way more careful than they probably need to, just in case, while others have been reckless because half the “rules” we were given to start with turned out to be unnecessary.

Our human brains don't handle ambiguity and nuance well. This shows up again in conversations about the various precautions we can take to mitigate the risk of virus transmission. Far too often, the question is framed as whether masks work or not, or whether physical distancing works or not, the kind of ‘yes or no’ question we expect a clear answer to. In reality, the answers are on a spectrum, a matter of degree: masks help, distancing helps. There is no absolute solution, just a bunch of non-surefire deterrents we can use to increase our chances of stopping the spread. It seems that while we have so much more knowledge than people in Bible times, our wisdom capacity for using that knowledge is still pretty primitive.

This lack of understanding makes it hard for us to be our best selves. When we don't have the information we need to make informed choices, we start to feel our lack of control more acutely. Most of the time, we're able to pretend that we're in

pretty good control of our lives, though that's largely an illusion. But this year has blown the cover off that self-deception completely, and it's terrifying. When we feel out of control, our next step is usually to find someone else to blame for our anxiety. We have seen this happening in our culture at large, when people faced with their own insufficient understanding of what's happening turn on our leaders, scientists, public health officials, and elected representatives with expectations that somehow they should have the knowledge that we lack. Instead of giving any of them the benefit of the doubt that they're making the best decisions they can, based on the information they have in each moment, we've demanded that they see the future and guess right every time and fix things that simply aren't fixable. When we're scared, our capacity for empathy decreases, not just for the leaders charged with setting policy, but also with neighbors who make different choices in response to the confusing deluge of information and misinformation we're all being inundated with.

Finally, for some folks, the desire to have clear information that makes sense of what's happening is so strong that they'll grab hold of anything that claims to explain what it all really means, even if it's patently false. This is how conspiracy theories develop and spread, a toxic combination of lack of wisdom navigating fabricated knowledge. While it can be appealing to subscribe to a theory that purports to make sense of it all, such ideologies only survive if sheltered from all outside information that reveals their gaps and holes and falsehoods. They are houses built on sand.

So it's clear that we're not doing so well relying on our own insight in this strange and confusing season of pandemic. Our brains don't process chance, ambiguity or nuance well. Our emotions take over when we get confused and scared by our lack of understanding. We make meaning where there isn't any and invent explanations for things we don't understand just like people in Bible times.

What would it be like to pursue biblical wisdom instead? What would it mean to try to journey to that "place of understanding" Job spoke of? And how can we head in that direction if no one but God knows where it is? All throughout the Bible, we are told that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." As modern, mainline Protestants, we don't like thinking of God as Someone we should be afraid of. So first we have to get past our knee-jerk reaction to the phrase "fear of the Lord". It's not about being afraid. It's about being in awe. It's about humility. It's about recognizing that God is God and we are not. In relation to wisdom, it's about accepting the truth that we're not always going to understand what's going on, that true knowledge is rooted in a deep awareness of how much we do not know. So in some sense, part of what will help us endure this pandemic is learning to embrace mystery. Understanding that creation is complex beyond our imagining, including the rascally coronavirus, can help us roll with the changes as we learn more about how the virus works and doesn't work and how to protect ourselves. The more we can let go of our need for 'yes or no' answers and absolute solutions, the better we will be able to cope.

But beyond the humility that is the root of wisdom, Job tells us that understanding is “to depart from evil”. The understanding we seek is not found in grasping more tightly to what we think we know. The Jesus way to wisdom is not striving but love. Understanding is love. Even if we’re not sure what’s happening, in any given moment, we can choose to do the loving thing, whether it’s wearing our mask or not cursing at the person wearing their mask on their chain, or giving over-worked public health officials the benefit of the doubt, or donating our stimulus check to help someone truly in need of it.

That is how we’re going to get through this trial. Not by figuring it out, but by loving our way through it. Not by having all the best and latest information, but by holding fast to the truth of love. What does love look like? It looks like caution, like generosity, like grace extended to others and ourselves. It looks like the humility that is fear of the Lord, that admits that we simply don’t know as much as we would like to and that we’ll never truly understand why any of this happened despite how much has been revealed. The place of understanding isn’t like an encyclopedia or even Google. The place of understanding is the heart of love. May we choose to live there, again and again each day. Amen.