

Proverbs 1:1-7; 3:1-8

Our first summer sermon series highlights three biblical books; Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These books get little attention in the Revised Common Lectionary and are seldom preached on in mainline churches. It's not hard to see why. Proverbs is not scintillating reading to most modern readers. Ecclesiastes seems a "downer" sort of book. And Song of Solomon is, at first reading, erotic poetry that seems more suited to a steamy romance novel than to Holy Writ.

Nevertheless, these three books are all part of Scripture, and it is helpful to read them as a group. All three books are in the Writings section, the part of the Hebrew Bible following the Torah, that is, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and Prophets. These three books are, in general, the latest and last-canonized of the biblical books. Two of the books, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, are part of the Bible's Wisdom literature. And all three books are traditionally ascribed to King Solomon.

In an academic, if less historical interpretation, the rabbis said that Solomon wrote Song of Solomon in amorous youth, Proverbs in seasoned middle age, and Ecclesiastes in disillusioned old age. Solomon *spoke 3,000 proverbs*. The book of Proverbs only contains a small portion of the 3,000. God gave Solomon a wise and discerning heart. And no mere mortal before or after Solomon compares to him in wisdom. The only man that exceeds him is Jesus himself.

Sadly, Solomon did not follow the wisdom given to him, for he married many foreign women, even though Deuteronomy specifically warned against having many wives, especially foreign wives. Eventually, the command did exactly what they had been warned against. The foreign wives turned Solomon's heart away from God.

The relative lack of attention to these books in the modern church does not reflect the attitude of interpreters of previous generations. Martin Luther, for instance, called Ecclesiastes "this very beautiful and useful book" which "on many counts deserves to be in everyone's hands and to be familiar to everyone."

In the Middle Ages, more than one hundred commentaries were produced on the Song of Solomon. In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song and never got past the third chapter of the book, which has eight chapters!

These interpreters saw what many modern interpretations and preachers do not realize: these books can provide the careful reader preparation for the daily life of faith and evocative images to stir the human heart to devotion. These texts are not narratives; they are poetry, and like all poetry, they communicate in language aimed as much at the heart as the head.

People are always asking questions about life and its meaning and what

makes a life well-lived. Maybe it's the economy, or the difficulty of maintaining families, or the community-destroying whisperers that fill our schools, offices, neighbourhoods and churches, or the challenge of raising children, or the breakdown of public trust in institutions, or the lack of deep friendships, or a combination of all these things and more. But for some reason, people seem to be searching for answers to questions having to do with the deep things of life and living well. In some ways, what we are overhearing in these questions is an ancient, deep, and ongoing conversation about what is good and wise and true in life.

And that conversation comes to life in the book of Proverbs, where we are invited into an imagined household to assume the posture of a child, a child sitting silently as the parent seeks to give instruction on what it means to live wisely and well.

To some, the book of Proverbs may seem like a Pollyanna view of the world as they equate it with such proverbial wisdom such as *“early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise”* or *“an apple a day keeps the doctor away,”* making one suspicious of such proverbial wisdom.

So, what does it mean to live ‘the good life?’ All three books ponder this question to some extent. They are concerned not so much with issues of salvation but with issues of how to live life in this world of God’s good

creation.

We live in a culture starved for wisdom, yet so few people search for wisdom in the book of Proverbs, where we will find ourselves being plunged right into the heart of ordinary life ... into the home or the marketplace or your neighbourhood. According to the book of Proverbs, this is the arena in which we develop our moral character and work out our faithfulness step by step, day after day.

The book of Proverbs is the quintessential book of “Wisdom” in the Old Testament. Wisdom literature seeks to teach its readers or hearers “wisdom;” that is, the attitude and means by which to live well. This kind of common-sense wisdom is based not on revelation (no burning bushes here), but on experience and observation. Nevertheless, it is grounded in a right relationship with God: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”*

The task of all Wisdom literature is character formation. It exhorts young people to do well by doing good; that is, to have “the good life” by exhibiting the virtues of honesty, hard work, self-control, and above all, the fear of the Lord. Wisdom literature addresses issues of everyday life: economics, friends, family, work, sex, politics, and so on.

What we discover is that the book of Proverbs is interested in the same questions that consume us: How can we discern right from wrong in a

world of competing and compelling claims? What values do we treasure and why? What makes for strong families and just communities? What characterizes a good neighbour, a loving partner, or a trusted friend? How do we understand money, the role of integrity, and the power of speech? And how do we teach it all to our children? As Ellen Davis, a biblical scholar, puts it, “The proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch,” which is to say, most days.

What Proverbs is trying to do is to get us to reflect on our lives with fresh theological insight and vision by looking at the ordinary around us and telling us what’s really going on. It may seem surprising that a book dedicated to teaching wisdom, which takes up such everyday matters as relationships, faith, business, money, sex, and alcohol, does so not with a series of recommended to-do lists, innovative strategies, slogans, or clichés, but with *poetry* — exquisite, crafted speech that has been polished and pertinent for centuries.”

Perhaps the sages know what we do: that navigating life wisely and well is itself nothing less than an art form — and so the shaping of good, faithful lives requires speech up to the task. According to the sages, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But, what does it mean to “fear” the Lord? At its most basic level, the fear of the Lord is the knowledge that God is God and we are not. When we are faced with the power that called the universe into being, that scattered the stars in

space, and that sustains the world every moment of every day, our proper response is awe, reverence, and yes, even to some extent fear. In Hebrews we read, *“It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*

Abraham Heschel, is a renowned rabbi and theologian, an expert on Judaism. In his book “In Search of Man,” he wrote: “According to the Bible the principle religious virtue is *yirah*. What is the nature of *yirah*? The word has two meanings, fear and awe. There is the person who fears the Lord lest they be punished in their body, family, or possessions. Another one fears the Lord because they are afraid of punishment in the life to come. Both types are considered inferior in Jewish tradition. Job, who said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him,” was not motivated in his piety by fear but rather by awe, by the realization of the grandeur of God’s eternal love.

Fear is the anticipation and expectation of evil or pain, as contrasted with hope which is the anticipation of good. Awe, on the other hand, is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery. Awe, unlike fear, does not make us shrink from the awe-inspiring object, but, on the contrary, draws us near to it. This is why awe is comparable to both love and joy.

In a sense, awe is the antithesis of fear. To feel “The Lord is my light and my salvation” is to ask “Why should I be afraid? God is my refuge and

my strength. A very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear.” The fear of the Lord, the fear of the God who created the universe but who deigns to be in relationship with us, is the prerequisite for wisdom. Such proper fear teaches us our place in the world and how to live well in it.

Perhaps fear of God is thought of better as an ingredient in a recipe or a part in the symphony instead of standing alone. It could be a true fear, mixed with an awe, mixed with a reverence just like flour mixes with eggs mixes with milk to make the cake or the violin mixes with the cello and the bass to make the whole song. It is multi-faceted and not understood fully when comprehending just one aspect. Seeing it as a multi-faceted jewel or a soaring song played by a full symphony captures it better. Broaden that out to the mix of fear and love to truly worship God in Spirit and truth. You cannot really know God and not fear God due to God’s Majesty and you cannot truly know God and not Love God due to God’s Mercy. We have two hands, we can hold on to both at the same time.

Several years ago, an Episcopalian priest from Michigan by the name of John Albrecht, gave a sermon that made it into the Guinness Book of World Records as the shortest sermon ever preached. Apparently, when it came time for the sermon one Sunday, Pastor Albrecht stood up, faced the congregation and said just one word to them. And then he sat down.

You’re probably wondering what word Pastor Albrecht said. If you were

going to preach a one-word sermon today, what would your word be? If I were going to preach a one-word sermon today, which I am obviously not, my word like that of Pastor Albrecht would be “trust”. For, in a word, that’s what the life of faith is all about ... it’s a matter of trust ... trusting God with our whole heart.

The third chapter of Proverbs calls us to affirm that trusting God means not being afraid even when you are vulnerable. Even when you are vulnerable ... is there any question that life is filled with uncertainties and vulnerabilities? Is there any question that things don’t always happen as we plan or expect? The evidence is all around us. Storms, both literal and figurative, happen all the time. Marriages fail. Illness comes without warning. Disappointments, both great and small, are common. Jobs aren’t secure. Life is complex ... and we are vulnerable and face uncertainty on a daily basis.

Amidst all the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of life, the book of Proverbs consistently lifts up the truth that happiness and security in life are only found in trusting God. We are admonished to trust God with our whole heart. The book of Proverbs also emphasizes that trusting in anyone or anything other than God is foolish, and furthermore, we should not lean on our own understanding.

Most of us have heard and understand what the Bible says about trusting God. And we don’t have much trouble believing those words to

be true when the sun is shining, the sky is blue and there isn't a cloud on the horizon. But what about when the inevitable storms of life come, and we wonder where to go for shelter and what to do. Do we turn to God and trust in him to see us through the storms?

Sometimes it is hard for us to trust God in the midst of life's storms because we're so anxious to see what's going to happen next. We want to see clearly what tomorrow holds, and we don't want to wait until tomorrow! Many years ago, the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at Mother Teresa's home for the dying in Calcutta. For a number of reasons, John's life was in turmoil, and John went there seeking a clear answer regarding how to best spend the rest of his life.

On the first morning in Calcutta, John met Mother Teresa. She asked, "What can I do for you?" John asked her to pray for him. "What do you want me to pray for?" she asked. John replied, "Pray that I have clarity." She said firmly, "No, I will not do that." When John asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." John then commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for.

Mother Teresa laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God." Sometimes it is hard for us to trust God in the midst of life's storms because we have convinced ourselves that we are all alone in our struggles, and we forget

that God is closer than we think ... right beside us, ready to walk with us through difficult times.

Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner, in his book, "A Room Called Remember," recounts a time when he felt all alone in a difficult struggle. His teenage daughter was battling anorexia and was desperately ill. This is how he describes what happened to him one day in the midst of his despair. "I was sitting by the side of the road one day last fall. It was a dark time in my life. I was full of anxiety, full of fear and uncertainty. The world within seemed as shadowy as the world without. And then, as I sat there, I spotted a car coming down the road toward me with one of those license plates that you can get by paying a little extra for a word on it instead of just numbers and a letter or two. And of all the words a license plate might have had on it, the word that it did have was the word T-R-U-S-T. Trust."

"And as it came close enough for me to read, it became suddenly for me a word from on high. Sometimes, in ways we least expect, God comes near to remind us that we are not alone in the midst of life's storms and that we need not be afraid." The Psalmist says, "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you, in God whose word I praise, in God I trust, I am not afraid," and "God alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I am trusting him."

Proverbs reminds us that trust in God is not being afraid even when you

are vulnerable, because God alone is willing and able to be our refuge and to lead us through all the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of this life. Trust God. Whatever your circumstances may be today; whether you are confronting storms, uncertainties and are feeling vulnerable, or whether life is relatively calm for the moment, the word is still the same. Trust. Trust God. Proverbs says it best. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take."

What an awesome God we have, a God we can trust, a God who sets us on a straight path, a God who guides us throughout life, a God who is source of wisdom, a God we should fear. As Proverbs says: "Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the Lord and turn away from evil." That is the beginning of wisdom!

Oswald Chambers wrote, ***"The remarkable thing about fearing God is that, when you fear God, you fear nothing else; whereas, if you do not fear God, you fear everything else."***

Amen.

THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE PENTECOST 2 - JUNE 11, 2023

Filled with promise, and empowered by love, let us offer our prayers to God, saying: Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God of love, you have created us all in your image; you have created us all wonderfully different. Help us to embrace the uniqueness of each person, and may we may discover our unity in you. Especially in this month in which we celebrate Pride we pray for families and individuals experiencing hatred and fear directed at them because of their sexual orientation, sexual identity, who they choose to love, and their relationships with others in the 2SLGBTQI+ community. We pray that political leaders consider thoughtful responses to growing attitudes of intolerance and condemnation shown towards the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Give them courage and conviction to have their actions and words convey inclusivity and acceptance, rather than fueling the increasing intolerance expressed by some that causes divisions and justifies harmful actions done to others. Protect all your children from harm and persecution and surround them with loving acceptance from others. Give us the strength of our convictions found in your promise we are all loved and precious in your sight. Help us to speak out when we witness words or actions of intolerance and hate. Give us courage to be loving allies, friends, and supporters of members of the 2SLGBTQ1+ community.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God of the Church, guide and strengthen the ministries of our Bishops, Pastors, Deacons, Sunday School leaders, Youth leaders, and our lay people, and help them to remember that whatever they do is in service and response to your extravagant love.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God of justice, you call us beyond self-interest; you call us to care for all. Strengthen us to stand with those outside of power, influence and wealth, and point to your steadfast presence among the weak, the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God of reconciliation, you invite us to work for restored relationships. Open our eyes to the divisions we create and give us the courage to dismantle them. Give us courage to live beyond our comfort zone, to cross boundaries and to see you in the eyes of the stranger.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God of Good News, your acceptance reaches far beyond what we imagine, and drives us to welcome those who have been enemies. Give us faith to let go of our hurt; help us to seek forgiveness from those we have harmed, knowingly or unknowingly; and to forgive those who have done us harm. Help us to hold on to your promise that love conquers all.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God of healing, you do not abandon us in our brokenness; we can trust your presence at all times and in all places. Restore those whose health has failed, and all those whom we name before you. [Long pause]. May the healing we receive strengthen our ability to serve.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

God, there are so many places in our world that cannot express their anguish. We lift up the more than 1,400 people who have fled their homes after the collapse of the Nova Kakhovka dam in southern Ukraine.

As devastation of all kinds ravages your world, God, we pray for the people of Nova Scotia, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia, where wildfires continue to burn, forcing thousands to flee their homes. Keep safe the front-line fire crews. Bring rain, cooler temperatures, and a change in the direction of the winds encroaching on communities. Open the hearts and provide the necessary resources of those communities who are receiving the influx of people searching for safety away from the fires. We pray for all of those in neighbouring areas who are being affected by the extremely poor air quality and smoke which they have been made to breathe which has reached as far away as Norway and

Europe.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

We pray that you may also listen to the cries of more than 13,000 people who have been displaced in Haiti following heavy rains over the weekend that left at least 42 people dead. As the waters of several rivers throughout Haiti overflowed, which in turn sparked flash floods, rockslides and landslides, these recent events have caused even further instability facing your children in Haiti.

God, we pray for the unimaginable tragedy of the worst train crash in India in over two decades, where at least 275 people were killed and hundreds of others injured. We cry out on behalf of all of those left behind after this unnecessary accident. Comfort the many who grieving the loss of loved ones.

We cry out to you, God, and ask you to incline your ear yet again after another mass shooting in the United States, this time a mass shooting at a high school graduation in Richmond, Virginia which turned to terror on Tuesday when a gunman opened fire outside the ceremony where hundreds of people were waiting. We pray for those who were killed, including an 18-year-old student who had just graduated.

As Jesus gave thanks and taught us to follow his example, we offer our gratitude for those who continue to respond to the needs of those—often our neighbours—who lack food and basic provisions. We give thanks for the many throughout the world, especially the CLWR still helping those in areas of natural disaster and conflict. It only takes one or two to inspire others to look outwards and join in. Lord, give us eyes to see how much we have to be thankful for.

Loving God ... **listen to the prayers of our hearts.**

Lord, help us to remember we, small as we are as individuals, are made to live in community with each other and you and to be channels of your love, grace and power. Help us not to be afraid of the endless

possibilities as we live our lives open to your grace. Instead of wanting to fix everything according to our own understanding, help us to be who You want us, and have created us, to be, thereby enabling the transforming power of your Spirit to flow through us into your world. Lord, let there be light, love and peace rather than darkness, hatred and violence. In your name we ask it.

Amen

God in Community, Holy in One, make us all one Body, as we pray as Jesus teaches us, saying,
Our Father ...