

Proverbs 8: 1-8 and 22-33

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Lady Wisdom at the Crossroads

Do you know Jim? He's the African American man who hangs out at crossroads. He stands there from early evening until well after dusk waving his arms and grinning broadly. You've seen him; I know you've seen him. This time of year he's wearing bright orange, yellow or red shorts and T shirts so you can not NOT see him, as he welcomes you and other commuters home from work.

Jim's a kind of male counterpart to Lady Wisdom, I think; EXCEPT that Jim is not female and I don't know about his wisdom. Like Jim, though, Lady Wisdom, in our scripture passage for today, also stands at the crossroads and broadcasts her presence. It's not flamboyant clothes and her broad grin that make her so-in-your-face. As scripture says, "[It's her] speaking of noble things. From her lips comes what is right. Her mouth utters truth." It's impossible to miss outspoken Lady Wisdom; which means, if you do manage to pull off a stunt that is other than wise, she is not to blame. She was there at the crossroads shouting out her good judgments, only you chose not to listen.

We have no excuse, then, when we do something really, really dumb--like the person you see before you, who tried to unclog the hose of her washing machine. She unhitched the hose ok, but she forgot first to turn off the water! Or, the woman before you who opened a gallon can of paint, put it on the foldout shelf on her ladder, and then decided to move that same ladder. Wisdom was there in the laundry room. She was standing beside that ladder. She was saying, "You don't want to do that. Think before you act. You're going to make a BIG mess." And I did.

Someone was telling me last week about a med student who was in a class learning to use electric defibrillators. The student took the two pads that are part of the defibrillator apparatus, and put them up to his head like this--"Hey, look, guys!" The electrical shock could have killed him. As it was, the student was just extremely shaken. His eyeglasses saved him. This med student can't blame Lady Wisdom. She was there in that classroom screaming, "Don't do it! Don't do it!" Only he was too busy showing off to pay attention.

That's the where of Lady Wisdom. She is Omni Present. The writer of Proverbs goes on to say that Lady Wisdom is also PRIMORDIALLY present. She was created by

God before the universe took shape. She would have been the main character in the preface of the book of Genesis, had Genesis had a preface. That preface would have gone something like this, “In the very, VERY beginning God created wisdom. God collaborated with Wisdom before he stretched out his hand and created the heavens and the earth; God conferred with Wisdom before he separated the light from the darkness. God deliberated with Wisdom before God crafted the dome of heaven which separates the waters above the heavens, from the waters of the deep.”

The point being, that Creation did not just happen. God had a thought. God crafted a plan. God ran that plan by Lady Wisdom. Only then did God create the universe. What is, then, is meant to be.

And that idea has been minced up, chewed up, and spit out by scientists. They would insist that there is no such person as Lady Wisdom, and our existence is NOT the result of an initial grand thought by an equally grand God.

Scientists, as you know, avow that the universe was created by an accidental cosmic explosion, that hurled matter in all directions. The earth is part of the resulting debris. It is star dust.

The plants and animals that inhabit the earth were not molded from clay and there was no life force breathed into them, as the Bible recounts. They are star dust, too, and their life force was perhaps the result of a random lightning spark.

Finally, all of life is related, say the scientists—amoeba and paramecium, ticks and fleas, corn stalks and potatoes, cows and humans. We are all cousins, but our differences are wrought, again, not by God, but by chance genetic mutations. Note the words I use here, accidental, random and chance. There was no plan at all. Lady Wisdom is a figment of our imaginations.

However, even Darwin, the skeptic Darwin, could not pin everything on chance. He said that his blood ran cold every time he looked into a vertebrate eye. That eye! How many random mutations had to occur throughout the millennia for that eye to develop to its current degree of complexity? And how does it happen that the eye developed separately in 40 different lineages? In other words, how come my eye works more or less like an amphibian eye when we diverged early on in the evolutionary tree? Darwin never did figure out that one and neither has anyone else. One idea is that our cells have an encoded blue print for organs like eyes. But how did that blue print get created?

YOU KNOW as I know, as the author of Proverbs knew, and maybe even as the skeptical Darwin suspected, there was more than blind and purposeless random selection at work to get us where we are today. I KNOW YOU KNOW because otherwise you wouldn't be sitting where you are sitting. We, who are believers, have learned to hold in tension Big Bang Theory and Evolution with our own faith in a creator God.

We're not finished yet, though. The author of Proverbs wants us to take our belief system to the next level. Just as God had an initial plan for creating all that is in the physical world, God, with help from Lady Wisdom, created a moral plan. There is a right and then there is a wrong. There are God-created truths for us to live by.

Wouldn't you know it? This idea, too, has been minced up, chewed up, and spit out not by scientists this time, but by philosophers. They say, in a nutshell, "There is no one truth. We each hold our own truth." There is my truth, your truth, and your truth. All of our thoughts and perspectives including morals are not true in and of themselves. They are the products of: our personal histories, our environment, the culture in which we have been raised, the list goes on. That philosophy, by the way, that there is no one truth, is called postmodernism.

So for example, you might say "Gee, it's a gorgeous day! The sun is bright and shining, The weather is temperate. The lilies are in bloom." Your neighbor might say, "Man, what a rotten day. The sun is glaring. The weather is hot and humid. Most of the spring flowers have withered." You can't measure the beauty of the day, and even if there was some sort of beauty measurement, it would be based on a person's or some group of people's perspective. Both are right. That's postmodernism.

I have read about postmodernism some, lived with it for awhile, and for the most part dismissed it. The problem with postmodernism is that it can lead to narcissism. Think about it. From a post modernist's perspective, there is no objective right—it is what I FEEL or what I THINK about something that makes it right. The day is rotten because I say so. In effect, from a post modern point of view WE are Lady Wisdom. Sounds dangerous, doesn't it?

Which leads us to Mohommad Yunus. He's a recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. He spoke at my daughter's graduation at Vanderbilt. Mr. Yunus was living in Bangladesh in the 1960's after having received his education in economics from Vanderbilt. He was struck by the poverty in Bangladesh so he decided to do some research. He researched the banking industry in Bangladesh. Mr. Yunus discovered that most poor people could not obtain even small loans that they needed to start their own

businesses. If they were able to get a loan, it was at extremely high interest rates. When he asked why so few loans and why the high interest rates, he was told, “Don’t you know, poor people don’t pay back loans.”

Yunus was after the truth. He was listening for Lady Wisdom. So, he decided to run an experiment. Yunus gave three people loans from his own pocket, a total of \$60, with only a handshake for security. His friends and colleagues said that he was crazy.

Surprise, surprise! The three people paid him back. Eventually, Yunus started his own micro loan bank. To take out a loan at HIS bank, you don’t have to offer collateral, you don’t have to fill out complicated legal papers, and there are no guarantees. Loans are based on trust. Today Yunus’ Bangladesh bank serves 7 million people.

Or take Dr. Paul Farmer the doctor who has been so successful at curing TB patients in Haiti. The professors at his medical school told him that TB was caused by bacteria. Dr. Paul Farmer treated TB patients in Haiti with antibiotics as he had been trained to do, but the TB did not go away. It just moved from one person to the next. Then he observed and he thought and he observed some more, and he discovered that TB was caused by two things: bacteria and poverty. When Paul Farmer treated the disease AND the poverty, both at the same time, entire villages of people got well.

Lady Wisdom was broadcasting her truth, but most of us have been seduced by our own biased half truths and false wisdom to hear her. Doesn’t it make you wonder how some problems, like global warming, the Iraq War, or Immigration, may be simply solved if only we can correct some of our false wisdom?

This week I came up with Gay Lee’s list of false wisdoms that were once, and maybe in some circles still are, accepted as truths:

Women can’t do math.

Black people are not as smart as white people.

Anyone can get ahead if they just work hard enough.

All people are greedy.

Real men don’t eat quiche.

Real women don’t pump gas.

I could go on. The point is, Proverbs keeps us humble. It reminds us that there is a truth, but it does not hinge on our own particular perspective. We can thank God for that! Lady Wisdom is shouting her wisdom at the crossroads. Are we listening?

For instance, when I was a teenager, I read a lot. One day, probably because my mother was worried that too many books and not enough play makes Gay Lee a dull girl, she said, “You will never amount to anything! All you ever do is read” When my mother died a few years later, I decided that to honor her, and to become a better person, I should put down my books. For eight YEARS I did not read any books at all.

Then, one day—one blessed day, I was driving by Dolley Madison Library in McLean. As I drove past, I had this sudden thought. It was my epiphany: “Your mother is dead. It is impossible to please a dead person.” Isn’t that pretty basic? I pulled my car into Dolley Madison Library’s parking lot, marched into that library and came out with an armload of books. I haven’t stopped reading since.

Where did that come from?

That being said, I have a question for you. As Proverbs suggests, is all wisdom already present in the world, and it is up to us to uncover it, bit by bit? Or is God continually feeding us, via Lady Wisdom of course, new and exciting bits of information.

I say that because maybe like me you’ve had moments of epiphany—that is, instances when a new thought suddenly hit you, changing your whole perspective about something significant—much more significant and less easy to come by than “don’t use defibrillator paddles on your head!” And you have thought to yourself, “How could I NOT have known something that basic?”

Or take William Wilburforce. I was listening on TV to Wilburforce’s biographer talk about Wilburforce’s life work to end the slave trade in early 18th century England. Until Wilburforce came along, slavery was an accepted institution the world over. But William Wilburforce thought slavery was wrong. He appealed to Brits’ consciences. Slowly, the concept of wrong and right as it pertains to slavery changed—in England. Today slavery is still practiced, but not widely. It is considered wrong not just in England, but the world over. What continues to haunt William Wilburforce’s biographer, is this: Why this change in our thinking? Where did it come from?

I can tell you how a scientist might answer this question. “You see, just as there are gene mutations, there is such a thing as thought mutations. These mutations result in wisdom evolution?”

To this I say, don’t believe it. Lady Wisdom is alive and well in the world and so is God. Lady Wisdom stands at the gates calling out her understanding and God is there, too, revealing to us that which Lady Wisdom has overlooked. May your eyes, ears and hearts be open to both. Amen