

July 26, 2020

Psalm 145: 12-21

Job 28:12-28

Letting Go to Begin Anew

The Reverend Amy Ruhf

Picture for me if you will, someone whom you consider to be wise. It could be a real person, or a movie character, or a book character. Have you pictured that person? What do they look like? Are they young, old, or somewhere in the middle? Where are they from? What is their vocation? How do they spend their days? What types of things do they do or say that make you think of them as wise?

As I started thinking about how I would answer each of these questions, I started picturing a myriad of people whom I've read or learned about, or met. But as I stopped to think, the image that kept coming back to me was the character "the Giver" from a novel by Lois Lowry of the same name. The giver was the only person in a utopic society who held the collective memories of the society and the world. Everyone else in the society is "the same" they are strictly regimented. People are matched in marriage, and each couple is given two children they are responsible for raising. It is a community devoid of feeling, and emotion, of color and of diversity. And the people of that community are ignorant to the fact that something else exists, with the exception of the giver and receiver of memory who alone understands the deep mix of characteristics and emotions that ordinarily make up a society. The giver is charged with holding all of the collective memories and with feeling all the emotions of the society so that he or she may advise the elders how to avoid the precipitating events that lead to pain and destruction. The giver is the "wisened" person who, alone, understands all that has transpired throughout the history of the society, and who feels all the emotion attached to those events.

The opening of our scripture today asks us these two questions: Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?

The book of Job is one of the most perplexing books in the Hebrew Bible. From a historical perspective, it is nearly impossible to determine if Job was a real person or if the book of Job was written as an allegory. Either way, when we encounter Job in today's text, Job has lost everything, he has lost his family, he has lost his health, he has lost his home, and he has done nothing to deserve all the loss he has received. Now, Job had had a pretty good life up until he lost everything. He had a large family, he owned a substantial sum of land and wealth, and he was of upright character. But then the adversary decides that Job's uprightness and faith should be tested, and

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perhaps the piece that is hardest to stomach is that God allows such testing. Job wants to understand; he wants to find some reason for everything that has been happening to him. He wants to know why.

I don't know about you, but "why" is a question I've been asking with some frequency lately. Why this virus? Why so much death? Why such hatred in the world? Why systemic Racism? Why white privilege? Why violence? Why oppression? Why? Why does a benevolent God allow terrible things to happen to good people? Now that is an age-old question; one humans have asked of God from the very beginning of time – if God is good and loving, why does God allow terrible things to happen? It is this question that makes belief in God as a benevolent creator so difficult for so many. How can an all-powerful, loving God allow such suffering in the world? We can try to search for that answer, and it would take our entire collective lifetimes, and we still would not find it. It is simply one of those things that we do not understand. It is beyond our comprehension. For the time in which we find ourselves, Job is an essential book of scripture. Job not only suffers but Job indicts God for allowing Job to suffer. And even in indicting God, Job remains blameless and upright of character. Job, even in questioning God, does not falter in his belief in God as benevolent creator of the universe.

But Job does want to understand. He seeks wisdom to answer his questions of Why. Above all else, Job wants an explanation, and really, I think we all do similarly. If we can understand what is happening, then we think that our pain will diminish. If only we had a reason for it, something that we could comprehend, some way to understand, something that makes sense... Job's search for wisdom takes him to the farthest reaches of the earth. The depths of the sea, and the deepest caverns, don't know it; the land on which he walks and lives and has his being doesn't contain it either. He knows also that he cannot buy it, not for any price. Wisdom it seems is so elusive that neither Life nor death has any inkling of it but a rumor.

Now, God's practical wisdom may be found by observation and reflection, yet God's relational wisdom while offered to us is elusive, easily missed, not found by human ingenuity, hidden from those who do not observe, hidden from fools, and cannot be bought. For 'God understands the way to it and God alone knows where it dwells', says Job. Why is it so elusive? It is because true wisdom involves fearing the LORD, and because folly is so attractive and seductive, and because despite our wisdom we cannot control the outcome of our actions. And it is elusive because wisdom is morally and behaviorally demanding. It demands prudence, discretion, self-discipline, integrity, humility, sound judgment, hard work, acceptance of correction, keeping promises, generosity, and wise and honest speech. As Graeme Goldsworthy wrote, 'The fear of the Lord means that the Israelite had to see himself as a redeemed but still imperfect person, in a redeemed but still imperfect world.'¹ The fear of the LORD is profound respect which causes us to acknowledge creaturely dependence upon God.

The wisdom of the redeemed is in letting go. Redemption doesn't mean that we are perfect, it means that we know our imperfections but know more deeply that there is a God who loves us despite our imperfections. Human wisdom involves letting go of what we know, what we want, what we think. It involves a willingness on our part to have our lenses changed, and to view the world in which we live in a new way. It involves us

¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, Gospel and Wisdom : Israel's wisdom literature in the Christian life (Homebush West: Lancer/Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1987), 142.

being open to God’s wisdom which is vastly different from our own. It involves us letting go of the myth that we must master everything that comes into our purview – that we must be perfect. It involves embracing the idea that perhaps what we perceive as failure is not as bad a thing as we have been conditioned to think it, but rather that it lays the foundation for new beginnings. The relational wisdom of God is perhaps most difficult for us to embrace or comprehend because the relational wisdom of God does not come without cost to us. If we are seeking after God’s wisdom, then we must give something up.

Right now, where I find myself seeking God’s wisdom most, is in the long and arduous journey toward racial justice and antiracism. And as I seek God’s wisdom in this arena, I am confronted with the fact that I am inadequate to the task at hand of dismantling the systemic injustice of racism; I am inadequate to the task of eradicating my own whiteness; I am towards a path of racial justice and antiracism. I can learn as much as I can. I can do the deep and difficult internal work of seeing myself in a different light – in the light of white privilege that is far easier and far safer for me to ignore. My finite wisdom is not enough, and it will never be enough. Seeking God’s relational wisdom as I work towards a more racially just world requires me to recognize that I have tried and failed, I will try again and fail again, but I can, I must fail better.

Learning to let go of the things that I have always known and always accepted is costly. It makes me question everything I have thought about myself. It makes me confront feelings of guilt and shame that live deep within me. Knowing that I am inadequate and will fail time and again, and that I have very little power to effect change in anyone else can be disheartening. But it is also the place from where things can begin anew; where things can begin to grow. Tremper Longman writes, “Fearing God is the heart of wisdom, because it demonstrates at a gut level that a person knows that they are not the center of the universe, but rather are dependent on God.”² The God who is all wisdom is the same God who created the world, who loves the world and everything in it.

This is what Job comes to find as he reflects on God’s laying of the foundations of the earth and control over the elements. God’s wisdom is very different from the finite understanding of human wisdom, but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t seek God’s wisdom. To seek the wisdom of God is to seek God’s very self. Not only does God sustain this universe by God’s endless might, regulate it by God’s wisdom, preserve it by God’s goodness... but also that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light... or genuine truth, which does not flow from God, and of which God is not the cause. It is this God who holds all things in god’s hand and grants wisdom to people to do God’s work in the world. So while I am inadequate, while each of us is inadequate in

² Tremper Longman III, “Preaching Wisdom,” 102-121, in Grenville JR Kent, Paul J Kissling and Laurence A Turner, “He Began with Moses...: Preaching the Old Testament Today (Nottingham: IVP, 2010), 107.

some way, God is more than adequate and will grant us the wisdom we need to begin again, as many times as it takes.

Conclusion: So what does that mean for us as we seek the wisdom of God in the here and now? When a pandemic assaults us, when systems of white power and privilege perpetuate systems of racial injustice? What does it look like for us to let go and begin anew? I think as Samuel Beckett put it, it means we try again, we fail again and we fail better, knowing that we are reliant upon God for all that we have, and all that we are. As womanist theologian and ethicist, Emilie Townes writes, “We know that loving and caring for others and ourselves interrupts the mundane and comfortable in us, and calls to us to move beyond ourselves and accept a new agenda for living. When we truly live in this deep-walking hope that we claim as Christian people, then we must order and shape our lives in ways that are not always predictable, not always safe, rarely conventional, and protests with prophetic fury the sins of a world that encourage us to separate our bodies from our spirits, our minds from our hearts, our beliefs from our action.”³ As we seek after wisdom, let us do so with open minds, open eyes, and open hearts that are willing to let go of what we have known, or what we expect, or what we plan; to even let go of our own feeble understanding, in order to embrace something new... a new beginning that begins with the everydayness of moral action. Maybe seeking God’s wisdom looks like the everydayness of listening closely when people talk or don’t talk to hear what they are saying both in their speech and in their silence. Maybe it looks like the everydayness of sharing a meal with someone whom you have never shared one before. Maybe it looks like the everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment, joy and love. Maybe it looks like the everydayness of facing people who expect us to lead them somewhere or at least point them in the right direction and walk beside them. Maybe it looks like the everydayness of giving up some of our power to empower another. Maybe seeking wisdom looks like getting up, to try again, to fail again, and to fail better, knowing that the God who made the universe is the ultimate source of wisdom and will give us the wisdom and the strength that we need to do so time, and time again. We do not need to know all things and to understand all things, we only need to know that the God, who is wisdom does.

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³ Townes, Emilie, “Everydayness by Emilie Townes.” Voices of Sophia (blog), July 9, 2006. <https://voicesofsophia.wordpress.com/2006/07/09/everydayness-by-emilie-townes/>.