

**WISDOM**  
Proverbs 1:20-33

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 16, 2018, at  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:*

*‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?  
Give heed to my reproof;  
I will pour out my thoughts to you;  
I will make my words known to you.  
Because I have called and you refused,  
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,  
and because you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,  
I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when panic strikes you,  
when panic strikes you like a storm,  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish come upon you.  
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.  
Because they hated knowledge  
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
would have none of my counsel,  
and despised all my reproof,  
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way  
and be sated with their own devices.  
For waywardness kills the simple,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
but those who listen to me will be secure  
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.’*

I.

I know that there have been times in my preaching where I have read to you writings that are too dense, too complex, too long for most listeners of any age to follow. One of the reasons that I continue to commit such homiletical malfeasance is that you often reward me for it – by listening, trying to listen, or at least being very good actors in convincing me that you are listening.

I plan to commit this sin again today, and challenge you, once again, to listen well. I will begin today’s sermon by reading a brief selection from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American transcendentalist. After we have survived our listening to Emerson’s beautiful but dense words, I want to show briefly how they are in

many ways consistent with the passage from the Book of Proverbs we just read. Then I want to offer three brief comments on the *source*, the *place*, and the *nature* of divine wisdom as it relates to our lives, rearing children, engaged in public service, retiring from the active life we have long known in the region of our nation's capital, 2018.

Two disclaimers at the outset: Emerson was not an orthodox Christian. He did not believe in the *personal* God we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His God was much closer to being *nature* and *natural law* than being the God of Abraham and Isaac, Ruth and Boaz, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition, Emerson wrote throughout the period of slavery and its eventual abolition in America. The *optimism* he expressed about human nature has to be tempered with the reality that the nation whose culture he was helping define was only *beginning* to deal with its original sin. Though he was a leading abolitionist, it is hard to see how the passage from which I will read would speak to those in chains, or those undergoing any kind of human trauma. Yet like many writers, including those who had a hand in shaping the words of scripture, Emerson's words ultimately transcend the limitations of their own time and place.

As I read this passage, please listen for Emerson's affirmations

- That the laws of nature are set
- That when we comport ourselves to such laws life is rich and beautiful
- And when we don't, life deteriorates.

So here goes:

[The laws of nature, (Emerson wrote)], *execute themselves*. They are...*not* subject to circumstance:

Thus, in the *soul* of [humanity] there is a *justice* whose retributions are *instant* and *entire*.

[The person] who does a *good* deed is instantly ennobled.

[The person] who does a *mean* deed is *by the action itself* contracted.

[The person] who *puts off impurity* thereby *puts on* purity.

If a [person] is at heart *just*, then...the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God, do enter into that [person] with justice.

If a [person] ...*deceive*, he deceives himself, and goes out of the *acquaintance* of his *own* being.

Emerson continues:

Character is *always* known.

Thefts *never* enrich;

alms *never* impoverish;

murder will speak out of *stone walls*....

But speak the truth – and all things alive... and the very roots of the grass underground...move to bear your witness....

The perception of [nature's] law awakens in the mind a *sentiment* which we call...*religious*...and which makes our *highest happiness*...

And the unique impression of Jesus upon [humanity], whose name is not so much *written* as *ploughed into* the history of this world, is proof of the subtle virtue of this infusion.<sup>1</sup>

Thank you. Deep breath. Shift in the seat. On to Proverbs.

## II.

Remember what I said of Emerson:

- That the laws of nature are set
- That when we comport ourselves to such laws life is rich and beautiful
- And when we don't, life deteriorates.

Now substitute “wisdom” for “nature,” and in the reading from the opening of the Book of Proverbs, listen for these same Emersonian affirmations.

*Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:*

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and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Miscellanies, 1868, page 120 (abridged). Quoted from William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004, originally published in 1902), page 25-26. This quote originally came from “The Divinity School Address.” *Italics are mine.*

What occurs to me as I read Emerson and Proverbs *back to back* is that Emerson expresses the *beauty* of comporting our lives with nature's laws while, in this passage, Proverbs expresses the *danger* of *not* doing so. Yet there is warning in Emerson as there is reward in Proverbs, and so we are left with these aforementioned affirmations:

- The laws of nature [in Emerson] and wisdom [in Proverbs] are *embedded* into the structure of our existence, like concrete within the foundation of a building.
- When we live our lives *consistent* with such nature or wisdom, our lives are rich and beautiful, as is the world around us
- And when we *refuse* to live within the structure of nature or divine wisdom our lives deteriorate and others suffer as well.

It is a pretty simple message.

### III.

#### (a)

What is the *source* of these affirmations?

I have to say that one reason I am attracted to the *density* of both Emerson and Proverbs is that when we have to *struggle* to read and absorb something – or even to listen to it in a sermon – we are less likely to take it lightly. The affirmations of Proverbs and Emerson are not like the peppermint we grab on the way out of a restaurant and pop pleasantly into our mouths.

While their affirmations are simple and basic, they arose in early in the history of the Jewish people (with Moses on Mt. Sinai<sup>2</sup>) and were developed further a thousand years later in Israel's wisdom literature. The fact that they arose so eloquently in 19<sup>th</sup> century America during a time of national turmoil and formation reveals that at the very least, these basic teachings about human nature, about right and wrong, are as *old* as human history.

In so much as for Emerson *nature is God* and for Judaism *wisdom is an expression of God's mind*, these basic teachings are *rooted in God's very being*. They are who God is, who we are, who we *aspire* to be:

*...those who listen to me will be secure  
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.'*

#### (b)

What is the *place* these affirmations are to be made and followed?

In the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs, from which our text is taken, the initial teaching set in the *home*: father to son, mother to daughter, teacher to student. But beginning in Chapter 10, the teaching moves into the *public arena*: the street, the squares, the busiest corner, the entrance to the gate of the city.

The affirmations contained in Proverbs and repeated by Emerson are thus not simply a moral code for personal and familial relationships. Rooted in the law of God, rooted in nature and nature's law, they apply to every

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<sup>2</sup> See Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

community, every culture, every era. In our culture, they live in the family meeting, the town hall, the school board, the classroom, the athletic field, the board room, the halls of Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court. What we teach in home, in church, in synagogue, in school, impacts the *public* character of our society as well as the *private* character of all who live in it.

This is why nearly every sector of our society at some time or another becomes a field on which competing moral visions try to claim what action is *aligned* with nature or wisdom and what is *not*. This competition of claims can occur in the finals of a major tennis tournament, in hearings over the confirmation of a Supreme Court justice, in political advertizing and rhetoric, in differing viewpoints expressed in editorials, sermons, cable commentary, talk radio, social media, and in a national ritual before an NFL game. All these sectors in our society are settings for a morality play in which we work out – sometimes with “fear and trembling”<sup>3</sup> – the definition of *who* we are as a people within the structure of wisdom and nature God has provided.

*Give heed to my reproof;  
I will pour out my thoughts to you;  
I will make my words known to you.*

(c)

If the *source* of wisdom is God and the *place* both private home and public square, the *nature* of wisdom and nature’s law is ultimately one of *hope*.

This may sound strange and naïve during a week in which we have been watching nature with baited breath; and it for sure sounds strange once we have gained enough experience or have lived enough years to have learned that life does not always turn out for the good, despite our best moral efforts.

- Evil happens, spreading like an undetected disease or erupting like gas explosions in a Massachusetts neighborhood.
- A nation conceived *in* liberty is also conceived *with* slavery.
- A storm fells a tree on a young family sleeping in their bed.
- Rain falls on the just *as well as* on the unjust.
- A marriage turns into a theatre of acrimony.
- Death visits someone we love far too early.
- Violence erupts in the streets of our cities or among the nations of our world, and it is always the young who die early.
- Some of us are born without our full faculties; while others, desiring to conceive, struggle.
- Even those of us have accept the inevitability of aging, never conceived it would be quite so painful as it has proved to be for us.

In a world like this, the hopefulness of Emerson and Proverbs can sound shallow.

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:12-13.

But the antidote to hopelessness is this:

- In the same section of the Bible in which we find the affirmations and promises of Proverbs, there is a book named Job, which asks “why bad things happen to good people”; and another, named Ecclesiastes, in which an aging preacher looks back on life and concludes, “Vanity of vanity: all is vanity, and a chasing after wind.”<sup>4</sup>
- These books remind us that when we cannot come to worship and sing “Joy to the World,” we can still, over time, find our way to affirmation. After much struggle, Job is able to say: “I know that my redeemer lives...”<sup>5</sup> and Ecclesiastes is able to say: “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come...”<sup>6</sup>

The underlying structure of wisdom and nature continues.

In another essay, Emerson wrote:

Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam.

All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world *in vain* set their shoulders to heave the bar.

*Settles forever* the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range *to it*, or be pulverized by the recoil.<sup>7</sup>

No matter how overwhelming our times, personal or communal, divine wisdom and nature have not changed:

The equator...returns to its line...

Divine justice is restored.

Star and sun,  
River and sea,  
Range to it.

So can and must we.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Job 19:25.

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:1.

<sup>7</sup> Lectures and Biographical Sketches, 1868, p. 186. Quoted from James, 25-26.