

“Does Wisdom Still Cry Out in the Streets?”
Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:5-12; Mark 8:27-33

Mark 8:27-33

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

James 3:5-12

⁵The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire.

The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Proverbs 1:20-33

²⁰Wisdom cries out in the street;

in the squares she raises her voice.

²¹At the busiest corner she cries out;

at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

²²“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?

²³Give heed to my reproof;

I will pour out my thoughts to you;

I will make my words known to you.

²⁴Because I have called and you refused,

have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,

²⁵and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,

²⁶I also will laugh at your calamity;

I will mock when panic strikes you,

²⁷when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.

²⁸Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.

²⁹Because they hated knowledge

and did not choose the fear of the Lord,

³⁰would have none of my counsel,
 and despised all my reproof,
³¹therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
 and be sated with their own devices.

³²For waywardness kills the simple,
 and the complacency of fools destroys them;
³³but those who listen to me will be secure
 and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Prayer on the 20th Anniversary of 9/11

God of All Eternity,

Twenty years ago today, those of us old enough to remember
 were waking up to a world
 we no longer knew if we could understand.

As the nation and the world reeled,
 people all over the world, in a tapestry of different voices
 but as with one voice, lifted up to you

the horror,
 the sorrow,
 the grief,
 the astonishment at the human capacity for cruelty,
 the horribly breathtaking spectacle burned into our memories,
 the human cry in the depths of our throats—

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
 be shocked, be utterly desolate...”ⁱ

the wondering how such hatred had been enflamed,
 the fear of what retaliation would look like,
 and what misery it would bring,
 the worry about what the next target might be,
 the unmitigated tragedy, repeated in 3,000 households,

of so many now gone,
and a thousand other thoughts, emotions, and prayers.

We witnessed almost unbearable bravery and sacrifice,
as rescuers ran into flames,
bounded up stairways wearing and carrying gear
in which most of us wouldn't be able to take a single step,
died under the collapse of the buildings
whose occupants they ran in to rescue,
and spent weeks searching, digging, mourning.

And in the days and weeks following,
you heard our prayers.

We told loved ones, colleagues, friends, neighbors,
that we loved them.

We stood in mute awe
as the world paused in respect for our brave and our fallen.

We wept uncontrollably
as a parade of nations,
some aggrieved by past actions of the United States,
rose to stand by our side as we mourned,
as Buckingham Palace played the Star Spangled Banner
at the changing of the guard,
as rural America poured resources, love and mercy
into the urban capital of the world,
as New Jersey lined up for New York,
as children around the world collected money
for the children of the lost
in Pennsylvania, Washington and New York,
as first responders throughout the world
took off their hats and helmets
in honor of their brothers and sisters,
and a thousand thousand other acts of kindness,

generosity of spirit, and goodwill
 pervaded our nation and the world
 at a tender moment for all of us.

You heard our prayers,
 and spoke into our abyss,
 and reached into the darkness to find us,
 and said, “I will take this brokenness,
 and weave it into a fabric
 that will cover all of my children
 in the time of their deepest distress.”

Twenty years later, O God,
 we are not yet the people you made us to be.
 Twisted self-righteousness and callous cynicism howl,
 our devices blare with calculated nonsense,
 and triteness doggedly claims a place at the table of wisdom.

If you will, O God, will you speak to us again,
 and once again cover us in the blanket of your goodness,
 your justice, your mercy, your beauty, your truth?
 Prosper the work of the handsⁱⁱ of those
 who rescue and feed and protect and teach,
 those who bless and cure and resolve differences.
 O prosper the work of the hands of those
 who work for change, for hope, for humanity,
 for the telling of the truth, and the unleashing of goodness,
 and the burial of enmity, and the healing of the world. Amen.

The Sermon

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 will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?”

Scoffing and even knowledge-hating are lucrative enterprises these days, maybe moreso than ever before.

There are so many channels now, so many formats, and so many eager listeners, readers, and watchers. People are looking for something to hold onto, and scoffing is clickbait—a breathtakingly effective way to attract significant attention.

Also, scoffing is fun.

I saw part of a movie the other night, theoretically a feel-good comedy, and I don’t think I ever even cracked a smile. It had an all-star cast; everybody involved had great pedigrees in movies and comedy, and I thought, “Surely it must be just me. What am I not getting?”

So, I looked up some reviews, one of which, from England, described this comedy as being “as feelgood and life-affirming as a fire in an asbestos factory neighbouring a children’s hospital.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Scoffing is fun.

And with so much money on the table, and so many people listening, and such enormous stakes, some well-placed scoffing in fields fertile enough to allow it to grow and thrive can even influence events at a national or even global level.

It can, whether intentionally or not, keep millions of ordinarily reasonable people from acting in the best interests of themselves, their families, their neighbors, their colleagues, the most vulnerable people around them, their region, the nation and the world.

Scoffing has power.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire,” says the Letter of James. “And the tongue is a fire.” It’s as dangerous, and has as much unleashable power, as a match held over a barrel of gasoline.

And sometimes, it just feels like, with all that scoffing, and all the evident power of scoffing and hatred of knowledge, that it’s too late; that the fire has spread too far and too wide; that discourse itself is out of control, and from now on there will never again be a way to constrain it.

Amidst all that cacophony, does Wisdom still raise her voice in the streets, and if she does, can anyone even hear it?

The next time you see a rainbow—and you will—remember Genesis, and how the bow in the clouds reminds God of the covenant God made, in which God declared that a flood would never again overwhelm us all,^{iv} not even a flood of scoffing and foolishness and hatred of knowledge.

The Spirit of Wisdom is listening, and speaking. Not just speaking: crying out.

She’s in the streets of the city, the public square,
the ball field, the pickleball court, the traffic jam;

she’s in the ticking time bomb of a forgotten but appallingly inappropriate and offensive tweet from years ago;

and in the campus quadrangle where protesters,
with no facts and lots of assumptions
are demanding someone’s immediate cancellation.

She hangs out in the suburbs at Starbucks,
jostles with teeming crowds all on their phones
on busy urban streets,

leans against a wall in a small town barber shop.

She reads every Facebook post; she hangs out in chat rooms;
she sees every frame of the 60 minutes of footage
uploaded to Youtube every second.^v

She's in the TV studio and the blogosphere;
the shock radio and the podcast.

She's in the line at the grocery store;
in the chair at the pedicurist;
by the vending machine in the waiting room outside the ER.

Everywhere people talk or type or interact or communicate, every place
where there is traffic and discourse, she is there.

She hears it all. And she speaks. And Wisdom says:

“How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?”

Seth Godin just published a short piece called “We Are Not
Astronomers,” in which he said,

“Unlike most of the sciences, astronomy is always done at a distance.
You can see the stars, but you can't do anything about them.

Sometimes the media would like us to believe that we're all
astronomers, simply passive witnesses in a world out of our control.

But the world is never out of our influence.

Remembrance, connection, possibility, invention, empathy, insight,
correction, care and justice are all up to us.

We not only observe, but we make changes happen. Our participation (or apathy) leads to a different future.

The ocean is made of drops. And the drops are up to us. Who else is going to care enough to make an impact?"^{vi}

If a young person, younger than you, came to you with a sincerely open mind, and really wanted to know something—not just to hear your thoughts, but to listen to your knowledge and wisdom and be influenced by you, someone they respect and who they believe would not steer them wrong—

If that person came to you with open hands, in total trust, and asked you what your relationship with God means to you, what you believe about Jesus, what your understanding of the Holy Spirit is, what you think the Church *at its best* is supposed to be, why you identify as a Jesus follower, if you do...

If that young, open, trusting, fragile person came to you and asked you *what is truth*, what would you want to tell them?

Would you encourage them not to be afraid to look for the best in people? To be empowered to reach for something with more light and beauty and hope?

Would you say something about kindness, generosity of spirit, faithfulness? Maybe justice, or mercy, or love?

I imagine you might say something about the people who have most inspired you, or what great people—not necessarily noteworthy people, but just great people—have done that was compassionate, or dedicated, or selfless.

I would be surprised if you didn't think about some unexpected, awesome kindness that had been granted to you by God, or parents, or grandparents, or friends, or strangers.

I wonder what your stories are, of people who have said something kind or supportive to you, no matter how small or in passing, and you felt yourself elevated and realizing you're not so bad, and you have something to contribute after all—

and what that did for you, not only in the moment, but for your understanding of what it means to be fully human, fully alive, fully cognizant that there is a God who created you and who has a concerned interest in your well-being and your fitness as a servant of God.

The story of Jesus with which we've been entrusted is a story about healing and caring and providing; it's about humility and kindness and justice, and being dissatisfied and impatient with people, circumstances and systems that are not kind or just.

On the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

"John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets."

"But who do you say that I am?"

Teacher? Guru? Savior? Judge? God? Life coach? Who do you say that he is?

Does our answer to that question echo and harmonize with the truth and beauty of God's Wisdom crying out in the public arena?

Or does it jar and grate against Wisdom,
 joining in with the toxic stew of selfish cynicism,
 devoid of care, concern or empathy for others

and instead focused on elevating whatever ideas,
 no matter how true or untrue, serve me personally,
 and using whatever words, no matter how ugly,
 to put down the beauty of someone else
 who is also made in the image of God?

Wisdom is still crying out in the streets. We can hear it if we try.

The world right now is depending on what we say,
 and how we show our neighbors, the world, and ourselves
 who and what Jesus is;
 who and what the Holy Spirit is;
 who and what God is;
 and who is the true source of Wisdom.

In the squares she raises her voice:

“Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you,” says
 Wisdom. “I will make *my* words known to *you*.”

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ⁱ Jeremiah 2:12

ⁱⁱ Psalm 90.17

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/09/mothers-day-review-julia-roberts-jennifer-aniston-jack-whitehall>

^{iv} Genesis 9:12-17

^v <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2012/05/23/35-mind-numbing-youtube-facts-figures-and-statistics-infographic/>

^{vi} Seth Godin, Seth’s Blog, September 11, 2021