

Sunday January 14, 2024

Lesson 7: The Marks of True Wisdom

Scripture: Genesis 50: 15-21; Proverbs 2: 11-12

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The second unit is titled “Empowering Discernment” with lessons on how God orchestrates events from behind the scenes as the figures appeal to God for wisdom. Today’s purpose is to contemplate ways God brings good out of bad situations in life.

We will continue with our exploration of two books from the Bible to see how the pursuit of wisdom is all throughout scripture. The first comes from the Old Testament and is the book of Proverbs. As we discovered last week, the book of Proverbs expresses sayings and allusions to help with Godly wisdom for life. The proverbs fall into two general categories: those which express insights about the human experience and those which have a religious dimension.¹ Today’s text emphasizes discretion and how wisdom helps people when others twist words, potentially leading us down evil paths. It is God’s wisdom which is to help us when we face situations where others attempt to bring us down, whether the other party attacks us or tries to manipulate us into temptation.

To help this set of proverbs come alive, the lesson’s other focus is from the book of Genesis at the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis contains the creation narratives as well as the dynamics of the Abrahamic family, who are the progenitors for the Judeo-Christian heritage. Towards the end of Genesis, there is what is known as the Joseph saga, which details the journey from the land of Canaan and how the family came to reside in Egypt.

A short summary of Joseph’s narrative before our lesson today is all about familial betrayal and unresolved conflict. Due to various reasons (found in Genesis 37), Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery from Dothan whereupon he is taken to Egypt to be a slave in the household of a prosperous man named Potiphar. Unfortunately, Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce Joseph and he rejects her leading to imprisonment after a false accusation of sexual misconduct. While in prison, Joseph can interpret dreams and thus secures his release after helping the Pharaoh interpret the foretelling of ominous times coming to Egypt. He rises in stature and soon holds an important office during the midst of a famine.

After a heart wrenching unification by which the brothers must plead to Joseph for food and he reveals his identity, there are still concerns about their relationship and the future. When their father Jacob dies, they are deeply concerned Joseph will retaliate against them. They go to Joseph in tears, and he responds back in tears when they say they will be his slaves. He gives them the rhetorical question: “Am I in the place of God?” Instead, Joseph asserts while they meant things for evil, God turned it for good. So great was the brothers’ plan to eliminate Joseph, there was another plan by which none of them knew but God.² God had a plan for life in which Joseph went to Egypt and his brothers came to him. God’s overriding purpose when humans plan

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 464.

² Brueggemann, Walter. “Genesis.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 373.

for evil is to remind us of good. During all the episodes, God had given Joseph dreams for his vocation and then to also remind his brothers of how God can and will work despite humanity's efforts to foil God.³ While the brothers may have sought to put the family in exile from God, God came back to them with comfort and promise.

Application

When we hear the word “wicked,” multiple things might come to mind. For some it is a playful term to talk about someone who passionate and mischievous. For others, it is about the Broadway play to tell the untold perspective of the Wicked Witch of the West in the *The Wizard of Oz*. Yet for most, wicked is used when people, whether they are innately this way or choose to be, decide to hurt others with malicious intent. The motivation can range from not liking the other party, envying them, or can have more to do with their own desires and need for control. As sinners, all of us, no matter how pious we may be, will have to deal with wickedness either within ourselves or the spiritual forces of wickedness which push and pull at us to act in certain ways.

Today's story and proverbs seeks to counsel all of us about how we might need to cultivate discernment of how God works amid wickedness. We use the word discernment because responding to evil or the wickedness of others is not an easy process; there is a lot of prayer, blood, sweat, and processing when it comes to dealing with both people and then the principalities of the world. As found in our lesson from the book of Proverbs and the Joseph narrative, a wise individual will have different paths to take and all those can make a difference in the world.

Regardless of whether we are good-natured or bad-natured or somewhere in-between, all of us will have bad situations come our way. Sometimes these bad situations come because of people like we find in the Joseph narrative. These people will do things to hurt or push us, and even still may continue to act out, seeking some kind of response from us. Or other times, we will be put into the situation of figuring out how to not carry a grudge, even if there is every right to do so. There are times when people act in ways which hurt us at our very core and as humans, we can only respond with pain and hurt; a deep sadness and rage of how others cannot see the harm they have caused. Or they do not care until they need something from us.

I once had a wise and wonderful mentor text these words at a transition in my life: “Read the Joseph narrative. They meant it for evil, but God will make it for good.” As I went back and reread the Joseph narrative, I was struck by how forgiveness was a journey and how Joseph had to focus on what was in front of him. He had to pay attention to his dreams God gave him, not giving into either despair or an extreme vengefulness. He kept his eyes focused on the present and God worked through it all to bring his story full circle.

God gives us the gift of Joseph's story for us to have hope amid the world. Even if people do and say evil things, it may take time for the ultimate purposes of God to be revealed. It may be hard to see through the pain and heartbreak, yet there is a horizon God invites us to look towards to seek both hope and healing.

Yet there is still counsel to come with the journey. As Proverbs gives unto us, we are to be watchful of how we respond to evil. There is to be discretion and understanding; we are to watch ourselves when others use ugly words lest we fall into the same trap of following the ways of the wicked and hurting others. We are called upon to watch our own souls, and to trust the Lord will take the evil we find ourselves in and if we dare, God might use us, so goodness comes

³ Ibid. 377.

out of the situation.

I recently had a former youth who is now a college student ask me about movies and if I enjoyed horror films. I confessed to him I wasn't as much a fan as I preferred action-adventure or historical films. Yet I did admit to finding meaning in the film *Carrie*, based on the Stephen King novel where a young woman finally snaps to inflict horror on her high school and community after cruel japes and a prom-gone-wrong. As a teenager, and now as an adult, I am struck by how people being humiliated or feeling like they've been humiliated can push people to act in ways which defy understanding. Like the main character Carrie, there are times when enough is enough and terror is unleashed when people cannot process all the hurt and pain in their life.

Yet as it is a horror novel and film, you can guess the direction of this character's pain and humiliation and how it all "resolved" at the end. With all due respect to Mr. King and the horror film industry, there was part of me to wish the novel and film could have ended differently with both remorse and repentance from the parties who wronged her and seeing the protagonist recover from their deep hurt and rage to truly being celebrated as a person of worth. What would have looked like for good to come out of evil?

Perhaps this is why God gives us narratives like our ancestor Joseph and the Bible. We are reminded of how in whatever situations we face as we deal with people who are two-faced or wicked, God is still at work in our lives. God is rooting for all of us so when we face situations which seems like everything is collapsing, God works for good to tell another story. God will be the one to prevail and we are invited to be a part of the story in beautiful and important ways.

How do you use discretion when you see evil things taking place? Why do you think God wants us to focus on wisdom in all situations? Who are people who give you direction during difficult times? How have you seen God make good out of evil? What are ways we can watch our words and how we are in relationship with others?

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