

# Wisdom's Call

Proverbs 8

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## Proverbs 8 (NRSV)

Does not wisdom call,  
and does not understanding raise her voice?  
2On the heights, beside the way,  
at the crossroads she takes her stand;  
3beside the gates in front of the town,  
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
4'To you, O people, I call,  
and my cry is to all that live.  
5O simple ones, learn prudence;  
acquire intelligence, you who lack it.  
6Hear, for I will speak noble things,  
and from my lips will come what is right;  
7for my mouth will utter truth;  
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.  
8All the words of my mouth are righteous;  
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.  
9They are all straight to one who understands  
and right to those who find knowledge.  
10Take my instruction instead of silver,  
and knowledge rather than choice gold;  
11for wisdom is better than jewels,  
and all that you may desire cannot compare with  
her.  
12I, wisdom, live with prudence,\*  
and I attain knowledge and discretion.  
13The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.  
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil  
and perverted speech I hate.  
14I have good advice and sound wisdom;  
I have insight, I have strength.  
15By me kings reign,  
and rulers decree what is just;  
16by me rulers rule,  
and nobles, all who govern rightly.  
17I love those who love me,  
and those who seek me diligently find me.  
18Riches and honour are with me,  
enduring wealth and prosperity.  
19My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,  
and my yield than choice silver.  
20I walk in the way of righteousness,

along the paths of justice,  
21endowing with wealth those who love me,  
and filling their treasuries.  
22The Lord created me at the beginning\* of his  
work,\*  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
23Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
24When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.  
25Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth—  
26when he had not yet made earth and fields,\*  
or the world's first bits of soil.  
27When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
28when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
29when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his  
command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
30 then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
31rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race.  
32'And now, my children, listen to me:  
happy are those who keep my ways.  
33Hear instruction and be wise,  
and do not neglect it.  
34Happy is the one who listens to me,  
watching daily at my gates,  
waiting beside my doors.  
35For whoever finds me finds life  
and obtains favour from the Lord;  
36but those who miss me injure themselves;  
all who hate me love death.'

The Book of Proverbs, as we read today, is much more than a book of short, pithy sayings that we English-speakers think of as proverbs. While the book does contain a wealth of two-liners, typical proverbs, the old sayings appear in the context of lengthy advisory speeches. These speeches come from rather strange personas, such as Wisdom, Folly, or Temptation, who all try to urge listeners to act in ways that are life enhancing and wise and not life-threatening and foolish.

Today we read a poetic speech from one of these personas, Wisdom, who appears as a teaching voice with some noteworthy characteristics. First of all, Wisdom is a divine woman figure, a goddess presence. Woman Wisdom, as she is often referred to, is not a random happen-alonging goddess, but a goddess present at the dawn of creation, made manifest in the beauty and order of the world and the heavens. She is the principle of order in creation, a divine attribute and purpose personified, or perhaps even God's very own self. Woman Wisdom is a mysterious divine figure, but seems to have been hand in hand with Sir Yahweh at the beginning of everything. The Lord BY WISDOM, founded the earth, says Proverbs chapter 3, the heavens, and the sources of life (3:19-20). But somehow the legacy of her place in the divine partnership was lost, to everyone's detriment, over the years.

There's a story about an old church patriarch getting to the gates of heaven, and Jesus comes down from the right hand of God's throne to greet him. "Ah, Mr. Bishop, welcome to heaven; I know you have met my Father, but I don't believe you know my Mother."<sup>1</sup> So perhaps when we express the creed of the church next time, saying, I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, we'll each hear a gentle "ahem" from the back pew, and we'll know it's Woman Wisdom, citing the Book of Proverbs, reminding us that God is a creative partnership, mysterious beyond all human images and genders to express.

Woman Wisdom, partner in creation, is not only a deity to be revered for her work in creation, but she is also a deity to be honored in human lives. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her, says Proverbs, she is the way to happiness, opening up a life in concert with the order and poetry with which the world was created. Divine wisdom is more than knowledge and information, according to our text, it is the art of living skillfully in whatever conditions we find ourselves. Wisdom is not so much knowledge, but living rightly, becoming skillful in honoring our parents and raising our children, handling our money and conducting our sexual lives, going to work and exercising leadership, using words well and treating friends kindly, eating and drinking healthily, cultivating emotions within ourselves and attitudes toward others that make for peace. And threaded through all this living, and this is the crucial part, is that the way we think of and respond to God is the most practical thing we do. In matters of everyday practicality, nothing, absolutely nothing, takes precedence over God. Humility before God is the beginning of wisdom, as the scripture says, and the way to the well lived life.<sup>2</sup>

C.S. Lewis has written somewhere that letting that fearsome mystery of God into your life is something like having your house redone; except that God does it according to God's own, wildly extravagant plans. Throwing up a new wing here and a new wing there, adding a floor, enlarging rooms, making grand windows where there once were only walls. You thought it was only going to be the addition of a gable or two. But God's plan is to build out of you a palace, so that God can come and dwell there, and be part of everything you do.

Another noteworthy characteristic of Wisdom is amplified in our text for today, she is not a distant or silent divine presence, she hits the streets with her call.

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and does not understanding raise her voice?  
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at the crossroads she takes her stand;  
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at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
4 'To you, O people, I call,  
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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Peter J. Gomes, *Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Eugene Petersen, *The Message*, Notes on Proverbs.

Lady Wisdom is not on a throne, but on a street corner in front of the town you go to every day, raising her voice, calling to you, to everything that lives. Listen, you simple people, shape up and learn good sense! My disciplines open the door to a life well lived, says wisdom, more valuable than any material things you can pile up.

Living wisely is the focus of the Book of Proverbs, full of practical advice to the ancient Hebrews, unveiling ways that they, and we, can let God be active and working in our lives. So much in and around us seeks to determine who we are and what we do. There is so much in our lives and in the world to be stressed and upset about, and that upsetting is not lost on God. But that's where wisdom comes in, calling to us from the street corner, making sure that the circumstances of life – often busy and difficult and uncertain – don't determine who we are. Because there is a danger of getting so caught up in life, that we miss the essence of life, unless we hear her calling.

A man went on vacation with his family. It had been a long year, and he was looking forward to this suspension in the normal routine of things. He was ready to put away the calendar and to get beyond a telephone and to do different things for a little while. But, without his noticing it, the to-do list for his vacation was as long as the to-do list back at the office. Read these novels go to this museum, take this hike, eat at this restaurant, get these chores done on the mountain house, buy and absorb these journals and newspapers. Until one night, his little four-year-old said, "Daddy, will you read me my stories tonight?" He stretched out on the bed next to her, and they read. And, because she was tired, he knew that as soon as this last story was finished, he could get back to his novel and begin planning the events of the next day.

But here is what happened instead. When the last story was over, she says, "Daddy, will you just sit here until I fall asleep." And so he did. And with the light out while she sang herself to sleep, he listened to her voice fade quietly away, and then to her breathing, and then to the curtain rustling quietly as a soft breeze ushers cool night air into the room, and then to the holy sounds made by wonder itself. He was aware that the fullness of time and the keeping of time were not as important and he was thankful.<sup>3</sup> People, all of us, need more of that kind of time, time to live wisely.

As one theologian puts it: "God is to be found not by stepping aside from the flow of daily life into religious moments and environments, or by looking away from creation to a spiritual realm beyond, but rather by entering attentively the depths of the present moment. There we will find God, wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing." (The Book of Creation). This is wisdom, and she is calling to us, everywhere we go.

my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.

33Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.

34Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.

35For whoever finds me, finds life

Julie Polter's elegant words perhaps say it best, that "this is the truth of God: all creation is one holy web of relationships, and gifts meant for all; that creation vibrates with the pain of all its parts, because its true destiny is joy." May you hear, and experience, our destiny, which is happiness and wholeness and peace, and understand that wise living is the pathway to God, to Wisdom herself.

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<sup>3</sup> Story told by Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw, president of Austin Theological Seminary.