

Uncommon Wisdom

Introduction:

Before we begin our reflections on The Song of Solomon, it's probably best to say a few words about what this series is meant to do. We've called it "uncommon wisdom" because we feel that these scripture lessons invite us to a less popular and underappreciated way of using scripture to look at the world around us. In a society whose only real success strategies appear to be exploitation, violence, and smear campaigns, these verses will show us another path to the good life- a road less traveled. These passages might comfort or challenge us in strange ways that we haven't necessarily come to expect from biblical texts. There's nothing particularly Israelite in most of this literature, and two of the three books we will encounter don't even mention God. Weird, right? I suspect I'm not the only preacher with little experience preaching on these books. Sermons on wisdom books usually require a little extra research and careful outlining for me than those based on narrative. I hope you will put in the extra work to understand these texts and challenge yourself and your hearers to let them speak truth to the realities of today.

These books—Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Esther—are part of a section of our Bibles called Wisdom Literature. Its genre is generally more poetic and reflective than the history and moral instruction we find in most of the Hebrew scriptures. It doesn't have a singular theological agenda, but its general goal seems to be an invitation to humanity to use all that God has given us as tools to contemplate God's nature, goodness, and desire for the world. Other pieces of Old Testament literature that fall in this classification include Job, Ecclesiastes, many of the Psalms, and some of the apocryphal books.

Our team feels that the Wisdom Literature invites us to look differently at the world around us. It doesn't explicitly endorse a specific moral code- although it offers suggestions. It doesn't provide a single clear article of Christian doctrine or lay out a chronological path to spiritual growth. Instead, it provides a lens. When I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with my campus ministry in 2018, we reflected each night on all we had experienced that day. An overwhelming theme- the "common wisdom" of the trip - was that Christian discipleship is not about the destination but the journey. Out of this framework, my relationship with God blossomed into something more symbiotic. When I started thinking of discipleship in this way, my time with God became a lot less about striving for some far-off thing that I couldn't understand and a lot more about an ongoing conversation with my loving creator and constant friend about what on earth (they) were up to in the world. I humbly submit to you, the preacher, that Wisdom Literature wants to do this for you and your hearers: to invite all into an ongoing conversation with a loving God about what's up in the world around them.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[\(Song of Solomon 2:8-13\)](#)

September 1, 2024

“The Time of Singing Has Come”

Planning Notes:

The Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament rarely receives particular focus in corporate worship for one Sunday, much less five. On the occasions we do pull out passages from the Wisdom Literature, we address specific, well-known texts like Ecclesiastes 3 or Proverbs 31 (which, you will notice, does make an appearance in this series). This series invites us all to come closer and listen with our whole selves as we encounter these books that straddle the line between story and poetry to open our hearts to God’s wisdom.

It is fitting that we begin with a passage from Song of Solomon that is, at its heart, an invitation to notice, to pay attention, and to respond to the love of the beloved with singing. As you plan worship for this week, consider how this worship gathering, in particular, sets the stage for the whole series. How do the images of mountains, hills, gazelles, rain, and flowers in this text invite us to pay attention to God’s love all around us? If the writer of Song of Solomon lived in your region, would these be the images he would use? Or might he have spoken of the beloved coming over sand dunes and mesas or through marshlands and rivers? Would he have written of the end of winter and the coming of spring or the end of the summer heat accompanied by the crispness of autumn air? How do your people encounter God in creation and how might you use that in the images, liturgies, and songs to invite the congregation to encounter divine love and wisdom in the midst of nature?

And, of course, if there was ever a day to emphasize singing, this is it! But notice that the time of singing accompanies the beloved’s invitation to come away, to come close to the one who loves us. Consider how congregational song and instrumental music might accompany the congregation as we accept and respond to God’s gracious work of forming us in love and wisdom as the Body of Christ. You might plan to sing a hymn that explores how we encounter God in creation, such as “How Great Thou Art” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 77), or that calls those gathered to pay attention to Spirit’s loving call, such as “Like the Murmur of the Dove’s Song” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 544). You might also consider choosing a hymn that will accompany your congregation through the whole series, such as “Praise the Source of Faith and Learning” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2004) or “Wellspring of Wisdom” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 506). Think of ways instrumental music might accompany a prayer or meditation that opens individuals and the community to Wisdom’s teaching. The time of singing has come, so let us sing, create, and worship together as we seek God’s wisdom as a community in Christ!

Dr. Lisa Hancock, Director of Worship Arts Ministries, served as an organist and music minister in United Methodist congregations in the Northwest Texas and North Texas Annual Conferences, as well as the New Day Amani/Upendo house churches in Dallas. After receiving her Master of Sacred Music and Master of Theological Studies from Perkins School of Theology, Lisa earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Southern Methodist University, where she researched and wrote on the doctrine of Christ, disability, and atonement.

Preaching Notes:

I understand that most of us aren't bringing the right questions to Wisdom Literature. If we are looking for self-help programs, we will be sorely disappointed. Even if we flip that familiar tactic on its head and look for surprises and countercultural imperatives, I still think we will miss the point. I think it's the difference between a map of local hotels, the turn-by-turn directions to the one you've chosen, and a list of local Yelp reviews. You don't look at turn-by-turn instructions to decide where you and your family should stay on your vacation. Instead, you see what your options are, find out what others are saying about them, and then break out a map for planning purposes. With rare exceptions, you probably don't exclusively use the map to get where you need to go. Especially if traffic is a concern on your route, you need turn-by-turn directions to help you make the best use of your time. If you're going to plan an enjoyable- and, of course, efficient- trip, you need all these things to play their proper roles in your decision making. The same is true for our biblical literature. If you expect the prose to be poetry and the laws to be liturgies, you probably won't find the scriptures very helpful. But if you let the Wisdom Literature come alongside other pieces of scripture, you will probably think twice. And then, the literature will have done its best work on your hearers and you.

Our first Wisdom book is a testament to love, its power, and its intrinsic goodness. Song of Solomon is a five-star Yelp review for true love. This is one of the books that does not mention God's name, but Christians and Jews have often interpreted its overall tone as an image of the love between God and humanity. The two lovers in dialogue throughout the book constantly strive for each other with passion despite the circumstances of life that keep them apart. The particular passage for this week describes the first time the two lovers meet. They know and admire each other somehow, but our author has not yet reported that they have spent time together. I have noted that we should not expect Wisdom literature to be explicitly prescriptive. Still, there is one fascinating instruction given just before the passage we have highlighted for today: "I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or wild does, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready" (2:7). Perhaps it is the speaker's reflection on the slow growth of this romance that leads her to make this proclamation about the need for patient love.

One of this book's most salient characteristics, especially this passage, is the heavy use of imagery and sensory language. In these five verses, all but the sense of taste are activated. The woman sees her beloved approaching her, and he announces the sounds and smells of the new season they are entering. The love encapsulated here is not some sort of spiritual, ethereal love that is nice in concept; it's love you can perceive. The strongest and purest love we could ever describe in this way is, of course, God, and your hearers do not need any help jumping to this allegorical interpretation. However, don't let the teenagers who are in love for the first time, newlyweds fresh off their honeymoons, and retirees celebrating their sixtieth anniversary miss the chance to hear that their true, wholesome love makes God smile.

At the same time, romance isn't comforting for everyone; this is where verse 7 becomes important again. Love and life don't move at a pace we set for ourselves; we can't stir them up before they are ready. Patience is a delicious fruit of this wisdom book. It's worth noting that the Western concept of a timeline isn't shared by much of the world. Time is described as a spiral, sphere, or circle in other corners of creation. These images offer uncommon wisdom about God's providence. When I survey my television and social media channels, I don't find many people saying, "The time of singing has come." The fact that we would pause, especially in the middle of a religious gathering, to celebrate love for all that it is, sounds pretty offbeat. Can we really afford to take time out of our busy schedules to love one

another? The Yelp review that is Song of Solomon 2 says it's totally worth it! By the end of this passage, if we stop to ponder it, we can hear and see and smell all that love longs to share with us.

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Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

([Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23](#))

September 8, 2024

"Choosing How We Shall Live"

Planning Notes:

This week, the lectionary text features three different couplets from Proverbs 22, all of which point us toward how to engage *wisdom*-driven decision-making in our daily lives. You may have heard of data-driven decision-making that emphasizes research, fact-checking, surveys, and drawing on the perspectives of multiple trusted sources. Wisdom-driven decision-making emphasizes insight and discernment centered around God's teachings about what makes a good life. And, in true Proverbs fashion, today's text unsettles popular opinions while grounding us in divine wisdom for building the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

You may have noticed that the graphics for this series emphasize wayfinding. Through the unifying image of a compass and the road signs each week, we're inviting your congregation to engage in an understanding of wisdom not as step-by-step GPS instructions for living, but as a navigational tool that helps us find our way—if we *choose* to use it. And so, on this first of three weeks in the book of Proverbs, it's important to help your congregants recognize that they have a choice to follow God's wisdom. Proverbs is not a book of commands but a book of recommendations and signposts, ways of knowing if you are following the path of wisdom or not. Now, I'm not suggesting that you turn the whole service into a "choose your own adventure" experience. But this might be a good time to incorporate one or two questions for reflection and meditation after the sermon.

- Do these proverbs make you feel intimidated or empowered to choose to live according to God's uncommon wisdom?
- What would it mean for you to pattern your life after these proverbs?
- What do the proverbs tell you will happen in your life if you follow the way of wisdom?

These are hard questions, but important for people to honestly assess as individuals and as a community.

Consider, too, how to incorporate the *uncommon-ness* of these couplets into the liturgy for today. What might it mean for us to call one another to the unusual practice of eschewing socioeconomic status and choosing to empower poor, rich, and everyone in between as equals? Perhaps the prayer of confession needs to emphasize the calamities we have sown as a result of our unjust actions. Or maybe the benediction can bless us to be generous to the poor and afflicted so that we might work with God in

pleading for their cause. Find whatever will work in your context to breathe life into these proverbs as guidance and wisdom for our lives here and now.

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Preaching Notes:

Last week, I offered some thoughts about how to use Wisdom Literature as if you were planning a trip. Proverbs is perhaps the book where it is most important not to assume that turn-by-turn directions from chapters 1 through 31 will get you where you want to be. Some of the Proverbs contradict one another; many have a sarcastic flavor, and they almost certainly were not given by a single author in the order we have them now. When the Book of Proverbs offers us a collection of several sayings, they are like the corrections one has to make when using a compass to chart a course. Your location on the Earth might subject you to magnetic alterations called *variation*, and nearby technology might interfere with your compass and cause something called *deviation*. Depending on the circumstance, this could significantly alter the compass heading you need to follow. If the compass on a map tells you to head north at five degrees, environmental factors might require you to follow a drastically different heading of eleven degrees. I give thanks to my days in scouting for teaching me these skills. The key thing about this, though, is that the original heading, “true north,” never changed. You’re not going the wrong way by adjusting your compass heading, you’re just responding appropriately to your environment and making sure the path you follow is still fruitful. This practical responsiveness is essential to the Wisdom Literature ethos. These books call us to employ wisdom that works.

I owe many thanks to my colleague, Dr. Lisa Hancock, for giving me another idea about how to describe what the Proverbs can do for us. She and I are both classically trained musicians, and she tells me Proverbs can work like something we call *études*. *Études*, from the French word for *study*, are exercises musicians use to strengthen a particular style or skill that is part of the much bigger quest to be a better artist. As a French horn player, I can recall a few important collections of *études* in my training. Some of them were very fast; we call those technical *études*. Their goal is to help you master flexibility and finger patterns. There are others, called lyrical *études*, that are meant to teach style and expression. Their notes and rhythms aren’t particularly difficult, but only a true musician can make them sound like art.

In this week’s selections, we have three *études*. Verses 1 and 2 are likely familiar to you and your hearers, just like the first *études* in all the standard collections are familiar to musicians. That doesn’t mean there isn’t something to gain from studying and internalizing them. Musicians often use *études* when we identify a certain aspect of our performance that isn’t up to snuff. In other words, *études* are most useful to us when we find ourselves forgetting what they’ve taught us. I plan to extend my congregation invitations to tangible discipleship practices throughout the coming year. One of those practices is to memorize a verse or short passage of scripture, and I think some of these Proverbs could be great candidates. My hope in inviting others to memorize scripture is that its words would become so deeply internalized that they are almost reflexive. As a highly liturgical Methodist, I’d like to think that’s

how much of the non-prose literature in our scriptures is meant to be received. Once you hear and repeat it enough times, you believe it and live it.

How can we preachers present these études in a way that inspires our hearers to practice them? Perhaps you could break up the reading of the scriptures to have one lector proclaim each proverb. Or you could have shorter reflections or homilies offered on the meaning of each one. This idea could be further enhanced by having different preachers offer each reflection. The reflections could also be interspersed with musical selections of some kind... maybe short lyrical études! However you present the Proverbs, remind your hearers that they are not just boxes to check. The Proverbs are begging not to be forgotten. In the same way that Wisdom herself is our companion in a time of need, the Proverbs individually are meant to be called upon when we need guidance for real life. When the rubber meets the road, what Proverbs will we call upon? Will we settle for common wisdom or press ourselves to strive for the uncommon?

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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

([Proverbs 1:20-33](#))

September 15, 2024

“Holding onto Wisdom”

Planning Notes:

This week, we finally meet Lady Wisdom, and she is anything but ladylike! In C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Beaver famously says of the lion Aslan, “‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”¹ We might say similarly of Lady Wisdom, “‘Course she isn’t nice. But she’s good.” If, as today’s title suggests, we are going to hold onto wisdom, it is important for us to know who we’re holding onto. In Proverbs 1, Wisdom is not meek or mild. She is not gentle and discreet. She is forthright. She tells the truth. She knows the way we ought to go and has no patience for people who refuse to listen to her directions. She is a *good* companion, but be aware—she does not suffer fools!

If all of this makes you feel a bit uncomfortable about planning worship this week, you are not alone. This is a hard text. There’s no getting around it. But that’s kind of the point when it comes to Proverbs 1. Wisdom will keep shouting her brash truth at us from the street corner. All of our efforts to soften her voice won’t work. So maybe this is the week we choose to listen and join in, to hold on tight and jump into the fray *with* Wisdom instead of against her.

As with any friend, one of the first things we can do to come close to Wisdom is to name and recognize her in our midst. So, sing a hymn that names the importance of wisdom in our lives. You might sing a well-known text such as “Be Thou My Vision” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 451) or maybe try a newer hymn, like “O Holy Spirit, Root of Life” (*The Faith We Sing* 2121). You could also shake things up and

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperTrophy, 2000), 80.

weave verse 2 of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 211) into the prayers of the people or as a response to the reading of the text. Even if these are hymns you sing in other contexts throughout the year, placing them in the context of a service focused on following wisdom will change people’s perspectives and bring forth new insights and understandings of what the hymn is about.

Similarly, consider how a time of corporate prayer—be it a prayer of confession, prayers of the people, or both—might be a time to practice Lady Wisdom’s honesty and truth-telling together. What would Wisdom say we need to confess today? Where in our lives as individuals and as a community would she point out that we have ignored her counsel? What calamities in our world would she stand in judgment over—not to heap shame on others but to shine a light on the consequences of our foolishness we’d rather not acknowledge? What, then, would she guide us to do in response? Lady Wisdom may make us uncomfortable, but when we hold on tight and follow her lead, we join the dance of the Triune God. And that, I hope, is *good news*, even when it doesn’t feel nice.

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Preaching Notes:

Here, in week 3, we find Wisdom personified. She cries out in the streets, pleading for us to listen, but we turn away time and again. Doesn’t she sound so over it? Can you blame her? The personification of Wisdom is a rich treasure from the Old Testament literature. Here in Proverbs, we have Wisdom personified at the bookends: (1:20-33 and 31:10-31). Elsewhere in the apocryphal literature, the wisdom of God is given even more direct agency in acts like the creation of the world. The common takeaway here is that wisdom in itself is given intrinsic value, much like love from the first passage in our series. Our authors do not wait to see if advice is good before lifting it up. They don’t wait to see who comes out on top in work, school, or business dealings to decide whether wisdom- or love- is worth listening to. Wisdom is just plain good.

In the desperate cry of Wisdom from Proverbs 1, we find a fascinating exercise of justice. Wisdom has gotten a little bit sassy here, especially in verses 25-26. She has given us all the second and third chances she can stomach for now, so it’s time we feel the consequences of our ignorance. We should feel a need for wisdom that goes beyond “because she said so.” I know, I hear myself, this doesn’t sound very Christian of me... Where are Jesus and Peter and the commandment to forgive my neighbor seven times seventy times? They’re still with us, but we must be careful not to confuse the call to wisdom with the call to holy living. They are related but not the same.

There is a certain freedom that comes to Christian discipleship when we let down our guards enough to be honest with God and ourselves. Sometimes, we ought to tell God that it’s totally fair for us to eat the consequences. When we do this, we aren’t neglecting the seven times seventy occasions of forgiveness; we are actually placing even more confidence in those words of Jesus than we otherwise were. When we dare to be honest with God and ourselves, we recognize that our actions have consequences, but grace

has the last word. But even better than this, wisdom and grace together make possible our sanctification. Wisdom might get frustrated with us, but she is a faithful friend. In next week's passage, we will find numerous examples of how Wisdom herself has been with us all along, paving the way for our good lives. The warnings she offers against being simple, hating knowledge, and scoffing are mission-critical, but she needs us to understand that for ourselves. Ancient philosophical thought is riddled with expressions of this idea. Lovers of wisdom have always held to the belief that doing thoughtful good is much better than mindless or reluctant observance of instruction.

I've been drawing on navigational images for the last few weeks to offer suggestions about what Wisdom Literature might do for us. In this passage, I think Wisdom is begging us not to forget how to use a compass. She knows we need turn-by-turn directions sometimes, but she also knows that the inability to discern north from south is disastrous. When she says she will mock our calamity after our years of ignorance, she's telling us that she dares to be the shotgun passenger who says, "I told you so," when we get ten miles into a neighboring state before realizing we're headed in the wrong direction.

I enjoy the opportunity to comment on this imagery because I, Tripp, am blind. When I was younger, I had a little bit of sight, and I've actually remained quite a visual thinker in my years of blindness. I learned from a young age that it was much more important to learn the layout of an environment and picture it from an aerial view than to memorize countless unique routes between points A and B, B and D, C and E, and so on. For this strange reason, I actually adore the infamous Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The terminals are consistently and intuitively designed so that observant passengers can know where they are. If you depend exclusively on overhead signs to point you in the right direction, you will be immensely frustrated. But if you learn the designs and distinguish north from south, you'll have wisdom that's useful in any situation. This is what Wisdom is begging of us. "Don't just wait for me to tell you what to do," she says, "Watch how I do it, trust in my helpfulness, keep your eyes and ears peeled for my signals. Then you'll have a clearer view of the world around you."

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Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"In Praise of Women Who Lead"

([Proverbs 31:10-31](#))

September 22, 2024

Planning Notes:

Over the years, Christians have done a good job of heaping historical and cultural baggage onto Proverbs 31, which makes it hard to come to the text with a fresh perspective. As you plan worship this week, perhaps begin by asking: "Where is the uncommon wisdom in this text? How might this text be intended to surprise us? What hints of the brash and honest Lady Wisdom do we find lurking in this description of 'a capable wife'?"

The title for this week certainly offers a starting point for engaging Proverbs 31 and these questions. Instead of focusing solely on the wives and mothers in our communities, Proverbs 31 offers us a portrait of women who lead and live in wisdom. Thus, it is a good opportunity, separate from Mother's Day, to emphasize the role and leadership of the women in your congregation. Perhaps your worship leaders can include members of your local chapter of United Women in Faith. Or one or two of the female leaders in the congregation can offer a testimony of how they live their faith inside and outside the walls of the church. This is certainly also a time to sing hymns by female hymn writers and to lift up the voices of women theologians throughout Christian history in our prayers and our preaching.

It is important, though, to do all these things and more with an eye to how Proverbs 31 calls us to recognize and follow women in leadership every day, not just one or two Sundays a year. Proverbs 31's description of a woman who fears the Lord in today's text is one of day-in-and-day-out leadership, relationship, and labor. Centering the voice and leadership of women in worship, then, ought not to be an occasional event, but a consistent effort in United Methodist churches. Women have long been important leaders in the Methodist movement, but the road to women's ordination has been bumpy (find out more of this history [here](#)). Consider how you might use this service not only to open up the deep, historic wisdom in Proverbs 31, but also to share with your congregation the role of lay and clergywomen in The United Methodist Church and the critical importance of supporting and encouraging the leadership of women in our denomination.

Dr. Lisa Hancock, Director of Worship Arts Ministries, served as an organist and music minister in United Methodist congregations in the Northwest Texas and North Texas Annual Conferences, as well as the New Day Amani/Upendo house churches in Dallas. After receiving her Master of Sacred Music and Master of Theological Studies from Perkins School of Theology, Lisa earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Southern Methodist University, where she researched and wrote on the doctrine of Christ, disability, and atonement.

Preaching Notes:

Wisdom, our loving friend, remains with us to the end. The Book of Proverbs concludes with an ode to her strength, but her abiding presence in these acknowledgments is what strikes me as most beautiful. We preachers must remind our hearers that this ode was never about finding the right wife. It's not a celebration of a 1950s homemaker any more than it's about a 2020s girlboss. This ode celebrates the faithfulness of that upstanding woman, Wisdom herself, who playfully prodded us along last week in chapter 1 and calls us to follow her our whole lives long. Read these verses and notice all the ways Wisdom is said to be at work while we're busy scoffing or being simple. She works with willing hands (verse 13), rises while it is still night and provides food for us (verse 15), opens her hand to the poor (verse 20), opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (verse 26). Many uncommon character traits are laudable, but wisdom surpasses them all.

Like so much of our scripture, Proverbs 31 celebrates how God's providence has mysteriously been at work in our lives all along. One of the phrases that comes to my mind when I think about this phenomenon- a modern-day proverb of sorts- is that "We're all just playing checkers while wisdom is playing chess." Have you and your hearers ever felt that way when you recognized the wisdom of God's providence? The older our scriptures are, the more they invite us to do this. The further back into our

story we look, the more opportunities we have to find God's hand gently at work. No matter how much we tested her patience, Wisdom never gave up on us, and the same is true of God's very being.

As we come to the end of our time in Proverbs, perhaps these final verses allow us to prepare for seasons of reorientation or reconciliation. I've invited us to think of Wisdom as an abiding companion, but what if we are estranged? What would it look like for us to confront the distance we feel between ourselves and our old friend? What if we have been ungrateful for Wisdom? She's worked so hard for us, and it's gone unappreciated. Maybe our hearers have neglected the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and have been estranged from Wisdom in this way, but what if there are also true friends or companions with whom we need to make things right? Perhaps they have been offering us crucial guidance that we've shrugged off, and now we understand they were just looking out for us. What are we to do to make things right? The final verses answer this question. We are to "give (wisdom) a share in the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the city gates" (31:31). Proverbs doesn't often tell us straight up what to do, but it tells us here to give credit where credit is due. It doesn't have to get much harder than that. As you think about practical invitations to offer as your sermon concludes, invitations to practices of gratitude and discernment are especially in order.

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"For Such a Time"

([Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22](#))

September 29, 2024

Planning Notes:

Our time in the Wisdom texts comes to an end this week in the book of Esther. While you might assume we'll be focusing on Mordecai's oft-quoted declaration to Esther, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14), Mordecai's words occur three chapters earlier than today's text. Today, we read about how Esther takes the wisdom behind Mordecai's words to heart and acts on them with courage and honesty. We learn from Esther that God's uncommon wisdom demands reflection *and action*.

For the worship planner, this text and this week's title give us a lot to work with. Lean into representations of time in your space. Include signs and sounds of the changing seasons. Draw attention to the clocks in our pockets, on our computers, on the walls that we might not even notice anymore. Challenge the tyranny of the clock, but also, perhaps, reframe the clock as an invitation to be attentive to the present moment—to listen to wisdom *now* and act on Wisdom's guidance.

Consider, too, how Esther's story illustrates what wisdom calls us to do—to act with courage, to demand justice, to advocate for accountability. Where in your neighborhood do you need courageous voices to speak? Where do your neighbors need the church to show up and demand justice? Where does your church need to hold itself accountable for past and present injustices? Wisdom persistently knocks at

our door with these questions and more. How will you enliven these questions within your congregation? Though some of these questions feel appropriate to a prayer of confession—and they certainly are—perhaps this is a week to intentionally engage in intercessory prayer. In intercessory prayer, we answer God’s call to pray for our neighbors and world. Yet, through intercessory prayer, we also open ourselves to receive God’s wisdom, to know how we might be called to be the answer to prayer for and with our neighbors. Consider, then, how the prayers of the people might include a time for listening to Wisdom’s call, for reflecting and noticing where God might be directing the church to act, for committing to choose to live out God’s uncommon wisdom in your community. Because no matter where you are, no matter what is happening in our world, God’s wisdom calls us to listen, to notice, and to enact God’s love in our world for such a time as this.

Dr. Lisa Hancock, Director of Worship Arts Ministries, served as an organist and music minister in United Methodist congregations in the Northwest Texas and North Texas Annual Conferences, as well as the New Day Amani/Upendo house churches in Dallas. After receiving her Master of Sacred Music and Master of Theological Studies from Perkins School of Theology, Lisa earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Southern Methodist University, where she researched and wrote on the doctrine of Christ, disability, and atonement.

Preaching Notes:

The final scripture passage for this series should provide an interesting twist. I’ll bet you didn’t expect these verses to come up when you read the title, did you? Armchair theologians love to quote the “common wisdom” of Esther to prop up their own views of divine providence. If they like the way something is going or if they feel convicted to seize an opportunity, they invoke Mordecai’s words to Esther from chapter 4: “Perhaps you have come to... (such and such place) ...for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). We humans tend to like this so-called wisdom. It makes us feel that we can easily validate our plans with divine endorsement and go on pursuing them. But that’s not the passage we’re talking about this week, and that’s not what the Book of Esther teaches us about God’s providence.

Instead, we are talking about the actual moment that Esther begs deliverance from the king, the moment when he grants it, and —very importantly—the moment in which the Jewish people inaugurate a festival to commemorate that deliverance. If you are not familiar with the basic story of the Book of Esther, a quick cover-to-cover read is in order. This is especially appropriate since the Lectionary skips many verses. You would be well served to examine how the plot and conflict of the story develop since this week’s lesson presents only the resolution. Additionally, I feel obligated to share here that some people do not classify Esther as Wisdom Literature but as an independent short story; they tend to place it alongside Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Jonah. Therefore, we preachers must have a grasp on the entire narrative to do right by it in the span of one worship service.

I’ve mentioned in previous weeks that Wisdom Literature asks us to think theologically in light of the world around us. Thus, I think wisdom is all about making proper responses to circumstance. Saints like Paul the Apostle, Augustine of Hippo, Basil of Caesarea, and many others often remind us that we can’t be blamed for our feelings, but what we do with those feelings does matter. In this week’s lessons, we see two important responsive acts: King Ahasuerus shows **mercy** in response to Esther’s plea and future Jews show **gratitude** in response to that mercy. I can’t think of any two character traits that are more uncommon in today’s world than these. Who really shows mercy these days? Who truly shows

gratitude? If I lend my neighbor money, the common wisdom of postmodern America says that I ought to profit by charging her interest and demand that she pay me promptly in full. If she falls on hard times, that's just too bad. Who is out there encouraging me to show mercy? The scriptures. The same is true for gratitude. We do a dismal job in today's economy of accounting for gifts. If I find myself living comfortably with my family and living the life of my dreams, who in my neighborhood is encouraging me to stop and be thankful? ...Crickets...

If you're looking for practices that express the uncommon wisdom of both the merciful King Ahasuerus and the grateful Jews, I submit that Holy Communion is a perfect candidate. Think about the names and texts of our United Methodist liturgies. Our prayer of confession begins with the phrase "Merciful God," and the climax of the celebration is the prayer called the Great Thanksgiving. When we confess our sins through prayer, we place confidence in God's mercy, which Saint Basil calls the most God-like attribute of God. We confess our sins to God because we know God will be merciful to us. When it comes to the Great Thanksgiving, it is important to notice how our liturgy invites us to remember all the times God has saved us. If we are people truly formed by Holy Communion, we tell and retell these stories because we acknowledge that we didn't earn or deserve any of this grace. Even better, just like the Jews who were spared celebrated their festival with generosity to the poor, our prayer after receiving compels us to "go into the world to give ourselves to others." In the fullness of its practice, Holy Communion invites us to live this uncommon wisdom.

This passage and these notes are prescribed for a fifth Sunday, so most United Methodist congregations won't be celebrating Holy Communion this week, but perhaps you can set the Table for next week. Check back with us then for resources related to the special occasion that is World Communion Sunday. In the meantime, let this week's sermon plant seeds for a richer celebration of this holy sacrament. Invite your hearers to think about how peculiar the church's liturgies are. Have they ever thought about how uncommon it is to share signs of peace? Have they ever considered that it's weird to collect an offering each week in a very public manner? How do our responses to God's actions in the world embody wisdom that is uncommon in our world? If these texts have done their job, then we will at least stop to think twice about these things instead of repeating the work of the people, week after week, by rote.

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