

**The Voice of Wisdom
Proverbs 1:20-33
James 3:1-18
Rev. Dr. Bill Young
September 22, 2024**



Where did all the years go? It just seems yesterday that Sue and I and our one-year-old daughter, Rachel, moved from Oregon to Missouri, and I began my teaching and chaplaincy career at Westminster College in Fulton.



Now Rachel just had her 50th birthday, our son Matthew is 47, we have two grandchildren (one of whom is currently studying at a Buddhist center in New Mexico), and I retired from Westminster College almost 15 years ago. In my last years at Westminster the President of the College started calling me a tribal elder. My hair is turning gray, my joints are getting stiffer, and when I look in the mirror, I say to myself, "Who is that old guy?"



As my grandmother, Bertha, whom you met last week, used to say, "Getting old is not for the faint of hearts," and I'm beginning to understand what she meant.

The advantage to getting older, I've heard, is that you become wiser. You are at the stage when you have learned, sometimes painfully, life lessons. So you may have wondered when you saw the title of this morning's sermon, "The Voice of Wisdom," will the old guy be passing along some of the insights he believes he has acquired in over 50 years of ministry?



If I succumbed to that temptation, I don't think I could improve on the words of Sir Winston Churchill once spoken to students at an English school. Legend has it that the headmaster of the school droned on and on and on in giving Sir Winston a flowery introduction. When it finally came time for Churchill to speak, he looked around at the auditorium full of students, and said, "Never, never, never give up!" and then sat down

Now, perhaps, I should just echo Sir Winston, say that in whatever challenges you face, no matter how difficult, never, never, never give up, and sit down.



However, the Scripture readings for today won't let you are me off that easily. The voice of Wisdom speaking in today's texts is not some old guy, with graying hair. The voice of Wisdom is a woman! Let me say that again, "the voice of Wisdom in today's Scripture readings is a woman! And when the feminine voice of Wisdom speaks in the first chapter of the Book of Proverbs, her words are not some well-worn clichés. They are sharp-edged challenges. When she speaks, it is not from the kitchen were some men (none I hasten to add in the sanctuary or with us online) still say women should stay, but at the busiest street corner, at the city gates, where the most important decisions are made—in the corridors of power we would say today,

According to our lessons from Proverbs, Woman Wisdom has spoken God's word before and her counsel has been ignored. And now, when calamity strikes, Wisdom will laugh and mock those who have refused to heed her advice. They have spurned her warnings have reverence for God and walk in the way of wisdom rather than follow the path of folly, and now when they cry out to her in distress and

anguish she will be silent. Those who refused to listen to the voice of Wisdom will suffer the direst of consequences. Before catastrophe comes, Woman Wisdom says, there will be one last opportunity to listen, one last chance to get it right.

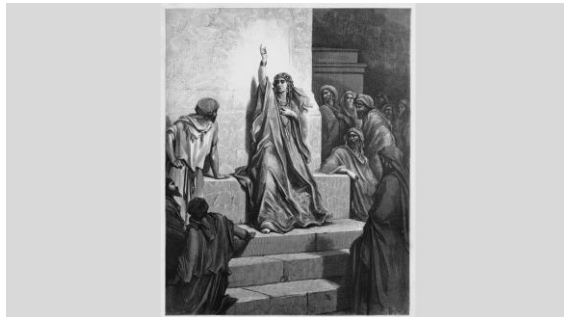
At a time when the prophetic voices of women are being silenced in fundamentalist moves on the rise in Christianity and other religions, it is important to be reminded that Scripture records some speaking the Word of God publicly and powerfully.



Here is just a short list from the Bible of the voices of women:

- the prophet Miriam who took a tambourine in her hand after the Lord had delivered the Israelites from oppression under the Egyptian pharaoh and sang (Exodus 15:21):

Sing to the Lord, for (God) has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.



- the prophet Deborah, who called the tribes of Israel to rise up against their oppressors with these ringing words (Judges 5:31):

So perish all your enemies, O Lord!
But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.



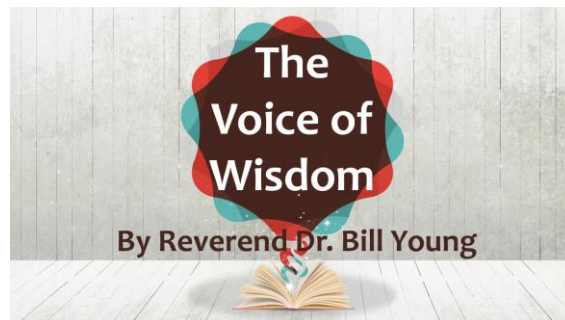
- Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, who sang of the power of the Lord to raise up the poor and needy (First Samuel 2:7-8).

(The Lord) raises up the poor from the dust;
 (the Lord) lifts up the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with princes
 and inherit a seat of honor.



- Mary, the mother of Jesus, who echoes her sister Hannah, singing of God's justice, bringing down the proud and lifting up the weak (Luke 2:52-53):

(The Lord) has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 (The Lord) has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.

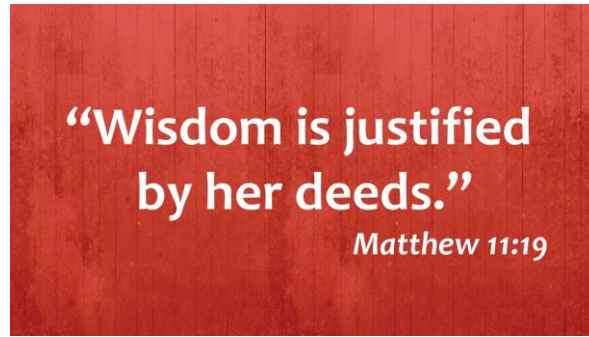


We could go on . . .but the point is made. Women in the Bible were anointed again and again by the Spirit of God to speak truth to power. Women spoke forcefully and clearly, challenging the privileged elites of their day with the Lord's vision of a world turned upside down, with the powerful brought low and the oppressed raised up.

However, Wisdom, the feminine voice speaking in Proverbs, is of even greater voice than Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, and Mary. Women Wisdom is more than a human, chosen by God to speak the word of the Lord. According to the eighth chapter of the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom was with God when God created the heavens and the earth. Indeed, she was at God's right hand, working with God to bring this wondrous universe into being, like a contractor who implements the architects plan (Proverbs 8: 27-31).

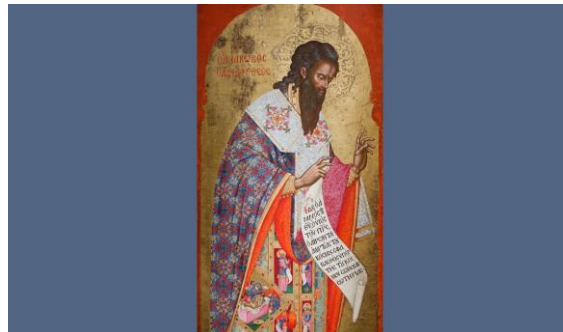
If we follow the thread in Scripture begun with the feminine Wisdom in Proverbs, speaking in the

corridors of power and present with God at the creation of the universe, where would it lead us? When the first Christians found in the Hebrew Scriptures images that helped them understand Jesus of Nazareth at the deepest and most profound level, some were drawn to the prophecy of a Messiah, a suffering servant, who dies for the sins of the world. Others, however, found meaning in Proverbs' image of a feminine Wisdom speaking truth to power, present with God when God created the world.



One such early Christian was the author of the Gospel of Matthew who, in speaking the works of Jesus, including the proclaiming of good news to the poor, says “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matthew 11:19). The evangelist clearly understood Jesus to be the manifestation of Woman Wisdom. Another was the poet-theologian who wrote in the first chapter of the Gospel of John of the Word who was with God at the beginning, through whom all things were made, who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The Word of John’s Gospel is, scholars tell us, another expression of the Woman Wisdom of Proverbs.

From reflection on the feminine Voice of Wisdom culminating in deeper insight into the full meaning of who Jesus is, let us nocturne to another dimension of the wisdom teaching we find in Scripture. From the little read Letter of James in the New Testament we learn that there were sages in the early Christian community, men and women who like the instructors evident in the Book of Proverbs gave practical guidance on how to live.



In the third chapter of James, from which we read today, we find a little essay warning against, to use a modern phrase, running our mouths too much. As all of us who are teachers, and all of us are teachers in some context, know from experience, it is easier to succumb to the temptation to fill the air with our own words than to keep quiet and listen to what is on the minds and hearts of students. “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak,” the Letter of James says earlier (1:19).



If we are learn to listen, we must gain control of our tongues. The tongue is small. Someone estimated that the tongue is less than a half a percent of our body's weight, but it has influence far beyond its size. The teacher whose words are recorded in the Letter to James compares the tongue to the bit placed in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship.



Both are small, but they control the horse or ship's direction. The tongue is like a small fire, that can set an entire forest ablaze. We humans, the Letter of James teaches us, are able to tame every species on land, on sea, or in the air, but we are unable to tame our tongues.

Do not we all know this to be true, from our own experience? You try had to keep yourself from saying something you know you'll regret, but that little piece of flesh, the tongue, wags and out come words you wish you could pull back immediately after you utter them. But like an arrow shot, or today we might add an e-mail message of text sent, once the tongue has been set in motion, you cannot stop the sound waves created.

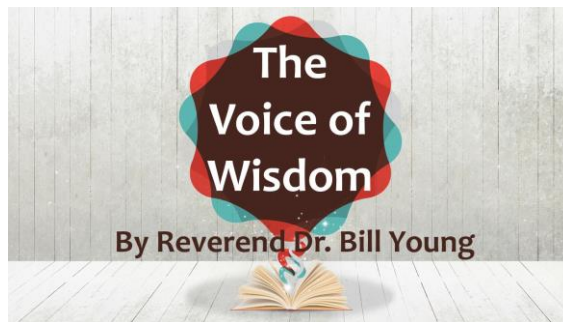
"I cannot stand you; you are worthless," an angry spouse, or parent, or child spouts forth, sorry in a second that these angry words spilled out. But the damage is done. As the teacher here in the Letter of James says, the tongue can be a restless evil, full of poison. The same tongue that praises God in worship can say something cutting about another person while walking out the church door. This teacher reminds us that when we speak ill of another person we are in the same breath cursing God, for that person you despise is made in God's image.

The bit in the horse's mouth is controlled by the rider . . . the rudder of the ship by the pilot. Our tongues are, without question, hard to tame, but in the end we must acknowledge they are in our service. It is within our power to use our tongues to lash out harshly and destructively or to form words that encourage and build up. With the free will God has given us, the choice is ours.

At the end of the third chapter of the Letter of James, inverses 13 through 18, our attention is turned back to the Wisdom we encountered in Proverbs, the heavenly Wisdom that comes down from above and speaks with a feminine voice. We can choose either to hear and heed the voice of Woman Wisdom, or we can follow the so-called wisdom of the world, the way of envy and selfish ambition. As described in James, Woman Wisdom has qualities associated with the feminine in cultures throughout the world: peacefulness, gentleness, mercy, willingness to yield, lacking hypocrisy or partiality.



I am reminded of the feminine imagery that appears throughout the world's religions. For example, in the Chinese religion of Daoism, the mysterious power from which all comes and to which all returns, the Dao, is described as a life-giving womb. Whether the Wisdom of the ancient Hebrew text, the Word made flesh of the New Testament, or the Dao of the Chinese classic, the *Dao Te Ching*, know that in gentleness in mercy, in yielding oneself there is true power, a power that ultimately overcomes all who aggressively assert their own pride and ambition.



As you look around this congregation, you will see sisters and brothers who inspire you with their mercy, their peacefulness, their kindness. You understand instinctively that in their gentleness is true strength, true power. Learn from them. For through their lives the Voice of Wisdom, God's wisdom, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, is speaking to you. That is especially important for all of us at Trinity during this time of transition.

The feminine voice of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs warns us against the folly of pretending we do not understand her message, scoffing at the way reverence for God and love of neighbor she teaches, ignoring her clear call to turn from lives of selfishness and greed. She says we have just one last chance to get it right. As the voice of the same Wisdom, speaking as the carpenter of Nazareth, says, "If you have ears to hear, then hear!"