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Preface

What Is Wisdom? Who Is Wisdom?

The first move we must make, as we begin to ponder the meaning of Wisdom in Scripture, must be to pray that God will grant it to us.

Merciful God of my ancestors,
with a word you created all things;
in wisdom you made humankind
to care for your creatures
with holiness and justice
to rule with upright heart.

Give me Wisdom who sits by your throne;
never forget I am your child,
your servant born of your handmaid,
frail, given little time,
with limited grasp of your laws.
Yet even someone perfect
is nothing without the Wisdom
that comes from you.

With you is Wisdom;
she knows your works,
was there when you made the world.
She sees what you judge as best,
knows what is right in your commands.

Send her from heaven,
from your glorious throne,
to be my companion,
to teach me your will.

Her understanding is complete;
she guides me wisely
through all I must do,
and guards me with her clear light (Wis 9:1-11; ICEL).

This we ask through Christ, our Lord,
Your Wisdom incarnate.

Amen.

This prayer leads us to ask three critical questions: What is Wisdom? Who is wise? Who is this Wisdom who knows God's works and teaches us how to be wise? Wisdom is not an abstract quality or virtue. It does not exist in some rarefied sphere or in dictionaries or how-to books. In order to grasp the full meaning of wisdom we need to experience it "in the flesh." We need to turn to our own experience and ponder this question: Who is your example of wisdom? Who do you know who is wise? Think of someone specific, someone you know. This person can be someone living or dead, someone in your family or among your friends. What is it about this person that makes you think he or she is wise? How does this person live? What does he or she know? What does this person do; how does this person act? Qualities that often characterize wise persons include patience, humility, honesty, common sense, a sense of humor, the ability to cope with ambiguity, and the grace to listen attentively to others. The wise person is also able to be wrong and to be fully alive in this present moment. What are other qualities that you have observed in people you consider wise?

Now, having focused on a living, breathing example, we must consider a second question: How did this person get to be wise? Most of us weren't born wise, so how did this person gain wisdom? The answer to this question is not simple. There is a complex interweaving of elements in becoming wise. But, first of all, didn't your wise person become wise through experience? Isn't that why we often associate wisdom with older persons? They have had enough experience to understand life and relationships and the world in general. But we know that just living a long time (or a short time) isn't enough. An old education journal once said, "Have you had thirty years' experience or one year's experience thirty times?" Reflecting on and learning from our experience is an important necessity for becoming wise. Because this wisdom is gained through common human experience, it is available to every human being. This reliance on experience also makes the biblical wisdom literature the most incarnational literature in the Old Testament.

The author of the biblical book of Wisdom knows that common human experience is the route to wisdom. He says:

I too am a mortal, the same as all the rest,
and a descendant of the first one formed of earth.
And in my mother's womb I was molded into flesh
in a ten-month period—body and blood,
from the seed of a man, and the pleasure that
accompanies marriage.
And I too, when born, inhaled the common air,
and fell upon the kindred earth;
wailing, I uttered that first sound common to all.
In swaddling clothes and with constant care I was
nurtured.

For no king has any different origin or birth;
one is the entry into life for all,
and in one same way they leave it.
Therefore I prayed, and prudence was given me;
I pleaded and the spirit of Wisdom came to me.
(Wis 7:1-7)¹

Common human experience is one principle. But there are more skills that must be learned in order to become wise. Your wise person probably also has a healthy relationship with God, a sense of reverence and awareness of God's loving presence in good times and bad. This wise person knows how to pray deeply and frequently. God is at the center of his or her reality. This person is also able and willing to be surprised by God, finding God in unexpected places and persons. These qualities are true whatever the person's religious affiliation is and however God is understood to be. We sometimes call this second principle fear of the Lord.

A third characteristic of a wise person is the capacity to enjoy life no matter what happens. Think again about your wise person. Isn't this someone who knows how to live well? Isn't that, in the end, what wisdom really is? The quality of knowing how to live well? Walter Brueggemann uses David as his model of wisdom. It's surprising, since Solomon is usually considered the patron saint of wisdom.² But Brueggemann's reason is this: David really lived. He says that you can accuse David of a lot of things, but you cannot accuse him of not having lived. There will always be sorrow and tragedy; the wise person knows how to grieve.

¹ All biblical quotations are from NABRE unless otherwise indicated.

² Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1972), see especially pp. 32-40.

As one of my wisest mentors said, "I may go to bed miserable every night; but I will wake up happy every morning." It takes courage to choose deep happiness even in the midst of suffering, but this courage is planted deep in those who are wise. Whatever does not lead to life is not wise, but, paradoxically, it takes wisdom to discern what leads to life.

These three characteristics are summarized in three principles of wisdom. The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. The basis of wisdom is common human experience. The goal of wisdom is life, the good life. We will explore all three of them in detail. Now I suggest that you consider again your wise person. Ponder how this person got to be wise, what his or her wisdom looks like. Does this person know how to live well? What makes you think so? Does this person relate deeply to God? How do you know? What is God's gift to him or her? In the process, you may want to begin to ponder your own life. Are you wise? How did you get that way? What does wisdom look like? In the end, can you define wisdom?

We define and probe wisdom through our own human experience, but we are not dependent on our own resources alone. We have excellent examples of the wisdom of the ages. As we proceed we will consider five biblical books that heighten our understanding of wisdom: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes (also known by its Hebrew name Qoheleth), Sirach (also known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira), and Wisdom. These books stretch over several centuries. The final form of the book of Proverbs, which is formed from several collections of pithy sayings, is considered to date from the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The book of Job is difficult to date. The story of Job seems to be older than the poetry. The formation of the whole book is dated to the seventh to fifth centuries BCE. Ecclesiastes is believed to have been written in the third century BCE. Dating the book of Sirach

is much easier. Ben Sira's grandson indicates the date of his translation of the book into Greek is around 117 BCE, so the writing of the original must be in the early second century BCE. Finally, the book of Wisdom, which was written in Greek, is commonly believed to have been written around 50 BCE. This "youngest" book is the only one of the five that expresses a belief in life after death. Thus the biblical wisdom books date from the seventh to the first centuries BCE, truly a gift to us as we probe this wisdom tradition.

Another source that is useful is the Rule of Benedict, which is itself a work of wisdom literature. Contemporary sources are also helpful. Finally, we have the experience of family, friends, and school. Wisdom is everywhere around us. We have only to tap into this wonderful flowing river (see Sir 24:25-33).

I intend to put this reflection on wisdom under the patronage of St. Scholastica, someone who is very wise. Scholastica's name comes from the root *schola* which means "leisure." So the ideas of contemplation and study flow from this root. Who knew when we were in "school" that it was a place of leisure! I'm not sure that our musical *schola* thinks our practices are all that leisurely either. But it is a gift of "leisure" to have the time for study and singing.

Monastics consider our life to be a "school of the Lord's service." Do we consider it to be a place of leisure? Not often, I suspect. Nonetheless, as hard as we work and as we will certainly continue to work, I do think monastic life is indeed intended to be a life of holy leisure—a life in which we can and do take time (prime time) to pray and to read, time to walk and to enjoy the beautiful world God has given us, time to be still and to hear the voice of God in our hearts. That is holy leisure. That is a way to cultivate wisdom.

So I invite you to enjoy some reflective time with this book, to enjoy the opportunity to practice holy leisure.

Spend this time with Scholastica (or your own wise and holy figure) and let her teach you that we don't always have to be rushing back to our responsibilities. What do holy people teach us about how to live well? Spend some time with God in your own heart and let God take care of you and the rest of the world. Finally, keep your wise person in view as you reach out to enjoy the goal of wisdom: the good life!

Consider

Do you have the courage to really live?

What stops you?

Who encourages you?

Prayer

Loving and generous God,
you who are the Giver of Life,
teach us to live our lives fully
trusting in your ever-present care.
This we ask in the name of Jesus,
who was and is always completely alive. Amen.



Listening

The Way to Wisdom

St. Benedict begins his Rule with the exhortation to “listen with the ear of our hearts.” To be wise is to be people who know how to listen. Take a quiet moment to remember a time when you received the gift of someone listening to you. Really listening! The skill of genuine listening is scarce in our society. We are bombarded by so many sounds, all clamoring for our attention. We have learned all too well how to tune out all this distraction, so we are in danger of also tuning out the voices that are essential for us to hear. Knowing how to listen and to whom is a major skill in becoming wise, a major element in learning how to live the good life. In my professional career I taught both music and language, both areas in which listening is essential. It is a struggle to teach students how to listen, how to learn and find delight through their ears. We are all very good with the mute button, canceling out the voices of each other and thus also canceling out the voice of God. But if we are going to be wise, we must learn to cherish this

gift of listening. Think for a moment of the wise person you remembered in chapter 1. Isn't that wise person someone who knows how to listen? Sirach says, "Happy is the one who finds a friend, who speaks to listening ears" (Sir 25:9).

If we are privileged to pray the Liturgy of the Hours together, the psalms that we pray every day teach us to listen. The psalms are, as we know, the word of God. God speaks to us through the psalms as through all of Scripture. So we who pray the psalms are becoming, slowly but surely, people who listen to the voice of God. But how do we hear God's voice? Day after day, as we pray the Liturgy of the Hours, we hear the voice of God in the voices of those who are praying with us. What does that teach us about listening to our brothers and sisters at other times? We each hear the word of God differently. If we are going to listen to the voice of God, we must each learn how to listen to each other.

Listening is one of the most significant ways to wisdom, a necessary skill to arrive at the good life. The first few verses of the book of Proverbs tell us that those who listen to this collection of wise sayings will learn about wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight, gain instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity. The simple will learn shrewdness; the young will learn knowledge and prudence. The wise will also hear and acquire skill to understand proverbs and riddles (see Prov 1:2-6). All this comes from listening!

It is essential for us to listen not only to each other but especially to the poorest and the least. These little ones are those to whom God listens. The psalms tell us this: "O, LORD, you have heard the desire of the poor. You strengthen their hearts; you turn your ear" (Ps 10:17). Again we are assured, "[T]ruly God has listened, and has heeded the voice of my prayer" (Ps 66:19). In Bertolt Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Grusche, the nurse for the governor's

child, is caught at a moment of grave danger. A revolution has broken out and the governor has been killed. His wife has fled, abandoning the child. Grusche is about to flee also when she hears the child cry. Then the chorus says to her:

Consider this, those who do not heed a cry for help
 But pass by with distracted ear
 Will never again hear the hushed call of a lover,
 the blackbird in the morning
 Or the contented sigh of the tired grapepickers at angelus.¹

If we do not hear the cry of the poor, neither will we hear the voice of the God who does hear their cry. There is no such thing as selective deafness. If we close our ears to what we do not want to hear, neither will we hear what we do want.

The Wisdom Woman tells us that those who listen to her will be happy. If we listen to her, we will hear the voice of God, the voice that leads us to life (Prov 8:34-35). How can our ears be attuned to hear this life-giving message? We listen to God's voice in the voices of the poor and vulnerable. We are sometimes blessed by hearing God's word in the voices of our family and friends, even if it is a difficult word. Qoheleth reminds us that "it is better to listen to the rebuke of the wise / than to listen to the song of fools" (Eccl 7:5). We also hear God's voice in the depths of our hearts. Sirach advises us that the counsel of our own hearts is more reliable than "seven sentinels on a tower" (Sir 37:13-14).

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (Berlin & Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 1963), 38; (original written 1944/1945) Act 1, Scene 2: "Wisse, Frau, wer einen Hilferuf nicht hört / Sondern vorbeigeht, verstörten Ohrs: nie mehr / Wird der hören den leisen Ruf des Liebsten noch / Im Morgengrauen die Amsel oder den wohligen/ Seufzer der erschöpften Weinpflucker beim Angelus." Translation mine.