



JONAS MEKAS, A FILMMAKER ONCE SAID: "In the very end, civilizations perish because they listen to their politicians and not to their poets."

So, we're gonna spend some time, listening to the poets and the artists these next four weeks of summer.

We will study together the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These texts are not narratives; they are poetry, and so like all poetry, they communicate in language aimed as much at the heart as at the head.

As we ponder these ancient texts, and prepare our hearts for

worship, I share poetry from a more modern-day poet:

Mary Oliver: Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Proverbs 1:1-7

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Proverbs 3:1-8

*My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.
Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people.
Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and she will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.*

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS IS 31 CHAPTERS. So, if you read one chapter a day in the month of August, you will finish an entire book of the Bible this month! You'll have to do some catch up since it's the 3rd of August, but they're manageable chapters. And you've already read parts of chapter 1 and 3 just now!

Now, I know some of you have goals to read the entire Bible in a year or 2 years. But sometimes those goals feel a little out of reach and maybe too long-term. This one, though, you can do - you can read the entire book of Proverbs in just one month! Read a chapter a day - well, chapters 1-3 today, and then read chapter 4 on the 4th, chapter 5 on the 5th, so on and so forth.

And let us know if you're able to keep up with it. It's a great way to start the day, better than a morning doomscroll.

The book of Proverbs is poetic, not narrative. And it is considered "wisdom literature." This particular genre in the Bible asks some of the most fundamental questions of life: What constitutes a good life? What is the meaning of my life? And what is the purpose of life in general?

These are age-old questions, questions people have been asking for millennia. And for the author of Proverbs, the meaning of life is inextricably bound with the seeking of wisdom. Without wisdom, even if we solve all the mysteries of the universe and receive the meaning of life, we will not understand it or know what to do with it. It is like, as Jesus once said, throwing pearls to swine. And so, our pursuit for meaning must be paralleled with our pursuit of wisdom.

According to the Proverbs, however, it is not we who seek wisdom, but wisdom who seeks us. Wisdom calls to us, beckoning us and inviting us to see the world as God sees the world.

Wisdom is often defined in the Bible as a gift from God, not a human achievement, and it is an ability to understand God's plan for the entire creation.

It is a plan where all are loved and where justice prevails, where all are treated as those who bear the image of God, and no child dies of hunger or at the hands of the greedy and powerful.

Now, in the Book of Proverbs, you will read again and again the sentence: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..."

Modern day readers may cringe at that word "fear." After all, we know that in 1 John, it is written that "perfect love casts out all fear." And whenever the angels show up to humans, they say, "Fear not!"

But imagine a world where the wealthy fear, not the bottom line or the loss of earnings, but instead *God's* judgment or disappointment. Or imagine a government that fears not the loss of power or prestige, but the loss of dignity and humanity for God's people.

A healthy dose of fear doesn't sound so bad right now where those doing evil don't even seem to try to hide it anymore.

A little visit from the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, put some fear into Scrooge, and good came of it, didn't it?

So should we have fear or not? I think it boils down to what it is we fear.

Fear of God - yes. Fear of anything else - no.

The word for fear in Hebrew is יִרְאָה (yir'ah). And according to the Hebrew lexicon, *yir'ah* speaks not necessarily of being scared or not scared, but of an attitude of awe-filled reverence. It may include trembling before God's majesty, but it isn't cowardice.

Yir'ah can describe both dread of judgment (Genesis 20:11) or the glad worship that springs from recognizing the holiness of God (Psalm 2:11). This noun appears about forty-one times in the Hebrew scriptures, and two-thirds of its uses is to form the phrase "fear of the LORD."

This word, too often simply translated as fear, gathers together human emotion, human intellect, and human will. As our *hearts* are struck by God's glory, our *minds* acknowledge God's sovereignty and power, and our *lives* commit to align with God's ways. Our emotion, intellect, and will, all responding to the majesty and wonder that is God.

This is the kind of fear that is the beginning of wisdom.

So what is it about God that we fear? What is it about God that should inspire awe and reverence and a commitment to God's ways over our own?

Well, I've got a traditional three-point sermon this morning, so you can follow along.

First is acknowledging that God is God, and we are not. You see, God is the creator, and we are the created. And while God is always moving towards us, wanting to be in relationship with us, God is also wholly other – transcendent and beyond our own understanding.

The apostle Paul writes, “for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face.” What we can grasp about God now, in our humanity, wrapped up in our little earthen bodies, is but a dim reflection of the holy and loving One who made us and made the world.

And when we understand that, we are humbled, and this humility is a facet of fearing the Lord. Friends, if the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then humility is another step on that path towards wisdom. That is the first of three points.

And here’s the second: wisdom also grows from acknowledging that God loves us, unconditionally and without fail. The letter to the Romans reminds us that, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation (Romans 8:38-39), nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And God’s love isn’t petty or calculating like ours can be. It isn’t reserved or hesitant. It doesn’t come with terms or conditions.

God is abounding in steadfast love.

And, church, I have a confession to make. I am not abounding in steadfast love.

If I’m honest, my love is more reserved and uncertain. It treads carefully and a little suspiciously. Now, I thought I knew something about love when I got married, but my capacity to love actually grew with the birth of my children.

And, please hear this: I am not saying you can’t love well if you don’t have children or if you’re not married because that is categorically false – Jesus loved well, better than any human who walked this earth, and Jesus, as far as we know, did not get married or have children. I’m pretty tired of the western church idolizing hetero-patriarchal families, lifting them up as the idealized norm for Christian living.

What I *am* saying is that, for me, having children allowed me to open up my heart in ways that I did not know were possible. Holding my first child felt like that moment in “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” where The Grinch’s heart grows three sizes. Literally, it felt like that.

And I am not a perfect mom. I am tired and cranky and short tempered most of the time, but I do love those kids. For the record, I do love their dad, too, but as I stated before, I am a work in progress when it comes to loving other adults well.

But take any other human love; think of the person, friend, or family member whom you love the most or who you know loves you the most, and consider how that love is but a tiny glimpse of how much God loves us. Perhaps that realization will put some fear and trembling in your hearts as it does mine, because how incredible is it that we serve a God who is capable of such unconditional and unending love?

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And love is another step on that path towards wisdom. That is the second of three points.

And here’s the third. God is in the business of resurrection and new life.

And if that doesn’t put some fear in you, I don’t know what will!

Because *that* means, we may not know what’s next for us, we may not be as in-control as we thought; we may have to change; we may have to let things go and let things die in order to make room for new life.

Annie Dillard says this about worship: “...we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” Annie Dillard had a healthy dose of fearing the Lord.

Friends, God is a God of new life and resurrection. Lee Strobel writes, “Jesus Christ did not come into this world to make bad people good; he came into this world to make dead people live.” So are you alive today? And if not, what do you need to claim resurrection for yourself this day?

We are after all, a resurrection people, so let us live as though we believe it!

Friends, fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And those who are wise are resurrection people who understand that we die and rise again and again throughout our lives.

Yi'rah, fear of the Lord, is not just some relic of a bygone religion. It is the heartbeat of our faith still today. It draws us into humble, loving, and joyful communion with God, and the communion table is one place, where resurrection can take place. It wakens us to new life as we feast with Christ. It joins us with saints who have gone before us, resurrecting their love and presence among us.

That's particularly poignant today, as we take communion, surrounded by the names of our unhoused neighbors who have died just this past year. These banners carry the names of the 296 people who died on the streets of San Francisco in 2024. They were created for the Annual Homeless Persons Memorial that names these lives lost in a vigil held on the winter solstice.

These names, known and loved by God, encircle us in the sanctuary today and join us at the great feast of our Lord Jesus Christ - we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses indeed!

So rise up, dear people of God, and let us seek wisdom together, seek justice together, breaking bread and sharing God's love with one another and the world along the way.

Amen.