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*Series: Summer in the Psalms*

Wisdom, Psalm 73

Before I pray for us together, let me share with you that I will be praying one of, what are known as the “O Antiphons,” prayers for Advent that date back to sixth century Italy. You may recognize some of the antiphons in the well-loved carol, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” And today, I am going to open our sermon with the antiphon entitled “O Wisdom.”

*O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the*

*Most High,*

*reaching from one end to the other mightily,*

*and sweetly ordering all things:*

*Come and teach us the way of prudence.*

Opener: Have you ever wondered why simple, hypothetical answers to life’s biggest

questions aren’t enough?

If you’ve listened to your fair share of sermons, you’ve probably heard the pastor use his or her children in sermon illustrations a time or two—often much to the embarrassment of said children. In an attempt at fairness, a couple pastor kids friends of mine recall how their parents struck deals with them so that the parent wouldn’t use them in sermon illustrations unless they asked the children’s permission first and agreed to pay them \$10 per sermon illustration.

Well, time has gone by, and a couple of these friends of mine have gone on to be pastors themselves. You would think that the fairness would continue, eh? But the shocking truth is that many of the parents of these pastors bemoan the shocking reality that their kids now use

embarrassing stories about their the parents in their sermons, without their permission and without giving them money. There is an irony in all of this, eh!

Nevertheless, I'm about to tell you a story or two about my boyfriend's kids . . . come what may!

Caden and Emily are 6 and 8 and live life with an absolute sense of fairness. Everything needs to be 50/50 for them, and heaven forbid that you should forget! If I give permission to Caden to light the supper candles one day, it ought to be unfathomable that I wouldn't remember to give Emily permission next time, even if Caden asks me before she does!

It's a funny struggle for me, because I'm also trying to teach the children that my yes means yes and my no means no. So, if I give permission to Caden two times in a row to light the candles, then I'm going to stick by my word. The kids live with a very simple understanding of fairness and it's pretty earth-shattering when it doesn't always go their way.

The Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament can seem to run along with these same "this for that" fairness rules. If you read the book of Proverbs, it's a glowing account of how if you do good, you'll prosper. If you are generous, you'll be rich. If you are kind, you'll be loved. If you work hard, you'll be rich. If you apply knowledge, you'll be wise. If you love God, all will go well for you. Proverbs 9:4 says that Wisdom cries out at the gates saying, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here." Is it that easy?

If you noticed in your reading of the Wisdom Psalms this week, they also run along that simple equation that morality equates blessing. Psalm 1 promises that those who are righteous will prosper in all their ways. Psalm 15 gives simple answers to life's questions. Psalm 91 promises protection for those who take shelter under the wings of the most high God. Psalm 112

promises blessings for those who walk in the fear of the Lord. Psalm 128 also promises prosperity. Completely isolated, these Wisdom Psalms can also read like fortune cookies. Follow these simple principles and everything will go well for you.

Seems simple enough, except when life happens.

Now, I'm a bit embarrassed to confess to you that I watch the longest running medical drama, Grey's Anatomy, which is in season 17, and has just confirmed that it will go on for an unprecedented 18<sup>th</sup> season. Yes, it's sappy, hence my sheepishness to reveal that I watch it when I'd rather be known for watching something more cerebral. But bear with me in my confession for the story of an intriguing character, Dr. April Kepner. Creator of Grey's Anatomy, Shonda Rhimes has done a remarkably poignant job of offering an honest representation of an American Evangelical Christian in the character of Kepner. As a surgical resident and eventual trauma surgeon, Kepner lives with this simplistic faith that reveals itself in hyper optimism and a rigid morality she feels constrained to follow. As her character develops, Kepner begins to struggle with the simplicity of her faith as it collides with the reality of life. Her straightforward notions on virginity, success, right and wrong, family values, and the questioning of suffering are deeply addressed.

Kepner's simple faith of  $1 + 1 = 2$ , or "love God and life will be beautiful" turns on its head as the years go by. This is especially true when Kepner's unborn baby boy receives a terminal diagnosis. As Kepner mourns her son's untimely death, she slowly recovers her faith in God. But, then tragedy comes again as she unsuccessfully tries to save the life of a baby boy in the ER.

As this episode, called “Personal Jesus” unfolds, the character Kepner acts as the narrator to her own story, revealing her internal turmoil as her simplistic understanding of Jesus and suffering unravels. Poignantly, Kepner is forced to reckon with another story from the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, the story of Job. In many ways, Job stands as the counter to Proverbs. Job is a proverb of a proverb not working. Listen to Kepner at the beginning of the episode as Kepner thinks about Job before she fails to save the baby boy . . .

*“In the course of one day, Job received four messages. Each with separate news that his livestock, servants, and 10 children had all died. He continued to be a faithful servant. He still prays to God. He persevered. Job’s faith was tested, and he passed the test. And for his faith, God rewarded Job with twice of what he had before.”*

After failing to save the baby boy in this episode, Kepner cries,

*“‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ That’s what Jesus said on the cross before he died. ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Job asked the question too. But he kept the faith. And what did he get for it? Replacement children. PTSD. Was it worth it to have been a faithful servant? Or would it have been better to just curse God’s name from the beginning? Where was God throughout all of Job’s suffering and pain? He was winning a bet with Satan. Makes you wonder where he is through all of the unfairness, inequity, and cruelty in the world. Where is he now?”*

Kepner reveals that her struggle is not so much why God allowed bad things to happen, but asking where he was when it happened. And, rightly so. It’s a fair question Kepner asks in Job’s story. I mean, come on, how could a loving God make a bet with Satan at the expense of Job’s 10 children? I don’t have an answer for that. It leaves me with honest doubt. It makes me mad, and

honestly it makes me wonder why Job is part of our canon of Scripture. I don't have the answer on that one, friends. And here's the shocking reality: the Scriptures aren't solely set up or told to give us simple equation-based answers.

And that is another big part of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. These Wisdom writings ask:

God, where are you when we suffer?

I've grown up and experienced enough of life by now to know the lesson that Caden and Emily are just learning: that life isn't always fair. I get that. Even if I don't like it, history and my own experience tell me it is so. I'm not asking why life isn't fair, I'm asking . . . and Kepner was asking, "Where were you, God, when I was suffering? When I *am* suffering?"

Let's hold that question, and layer on another question or two from today's Psalm of Wisdom, Psalm 73. Here, the writer is Asaph and he is struggling with the lack of fairness in the world, too. In verse 3, Asaph confesses,

*"For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."*

Asaph gets that the Proverbs don't always just work. Did he know that Jesus would also turn a lot of the Proverbs on their heads when Jesus said,

*"God sends rain on the just and the unjust?"*

I don't know, but Asaph takes a lot of words to talk about trying to make sense of why the wicked prosper. Verse 4,

*"They have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek."*

In verse 10, Asaph bemoans the popularity of the wicked,

*“The people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.”*

Verse 12 continues,

*“Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.”*

There’s a very important turning point for Asaph in verses 16-17:

*“But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task,  
until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I perceived their end.”*

There’s a pretty big piece of comfort in knowing that the end of the story is written by God. In the end, “All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well” as Julian of Norwich beautifully writes. In the end, every sad thing will be made untrue, every wrong will be made right, and God’s economy will have full reign. Imagine it, brothers and sisters. There will be a day when innocent children will not die because they lack access to clean water. There will be a day when we will be incapable of sinning. There will be a day when The Promised Land comes down to earth and racial inequality is finally and forever dead. There will be a day when God’s vengeance will come to those who committed unspeakably evil acts in this life without repentance. There will be a day when I meet my four brothers and sisters who died in my mother’s womb. There will be a day when, what Paul describes as the glass through which we dimly look will be made clear and we will see life from the eyes of eternity (1 Cor. 13:12).

Asaph clings to this hope. Asaph also realizes, and lives into, this hope in the here and now. In verses 23-25 Asaph confesses:

23 *Nevertheless I am continually with you;*

*you hold my right hand.*

24 *You guide me with your counsel,*

*and afterward you will receive me with honor.*

25 *Whom have I in heaven but you?*

*And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.*

26 *My flesh and my heart may fail,*

*but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

There's something important I don't want us to miss, friends. The "answer" to Asaph's question isn't an equation, but a story that finishes. Asaph rests in the hope of what is to come. He ends his Psalm not so much with gratification in the coming vengeance of God, but in knowing that it is this God who finishes the story and who will keep him in the here and now.

Charles Spurgeon has a commentary on the Psalms, and in it he tells a story of a dying saint that asked that his name be put on his tombstone with the dates of his birth and death, and the one word, "Kept."

Again, Julian of Norwich who wrote "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" lived in a time of death and dying. She lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and during that time, the life expectancy of someone was their mid thirties, and if sickness didn't kill you, poverty, accidents, childbirth, or war would. And yet in this time of great suffering, Julian also wrote of three great truths. That we are *made, loved, and kept* by Jesus. Julian found astonishment and wonder in this power of God to make, love, and keep us when she contemplated the simple reality of a hazelnut. Julian writes:

*“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.*

*In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.”*

Friends, knowing our future hope emboldens us, just as it emboldened Asaph, to realize and experience the nearness of God in the here and now. Theologians call this our eschatological hope. Meaning, our reason for hope right now is that the future and the end of the story are told by God himself, and that ending is a truly good ending, where “all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”

And so here’s my Big Idea for today’s Sermon: God doesn’t answer life’s questions with simple equations. He writes a story.

But what about Dr. April Kepner? Remember her gnawing question:

*“Where was God throughout all of Job’s suffering and pain? He was winning a bet with Satan. Makes you wonder where he is through all of the unfairness, inequity, and cruelty in the world. Where is he now?”*

The question of Where is God when we suffer? is only partially resolved in our eschatological hope. But is that enough? Do we just hold onto that hope and try to bring that hope down to earth in the here and now? Do we just try to get through life? Is that all? Remember Kepner's earlier statement before she goes on a riff about Job? Kepner quotes Jesus on the cross:

*“‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ That’s what Jesus said on the cross before he died. ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*

Jesus, very God of very God, breaks every precedent of humanity's understanding of far-off, way-up-there-in-the-heavens-deities when he comes to live among us in the flesh. The church Father Irenaeus went so far as to call what Jesus did in coming to earth “the scandal of the incarnation.” A frail child, born into a poor family, who becomes a refugee, and lives a life of suffering answers the question of suffering, not by an equation of  $1 + 1 = 2$ , but in the story of his dying and rising. Where were you when I was suffering? Jesus answers this question in story, for Jesus was on the cross. Singer songwriter Matt Maher contemplates this shocking reality of Christ Crucified when he writes:

“And where were You when all that I've hoped for?

Where You when all that I've dreamed

Came crashing down in shambles around me?

Where were You when sin stole my innocence?

Where were You when I was ashamed?

Hiding in a life I wish I never made

You were on the cross”

I remember a friend of mine in her late life still clinging to the Suffering Christ as her only comfort—not her only answer, but her only comfort—as she yet lived with the reality of a hearing-impaired son. A son who did nothing wrong to suffer in this way, and yet did. Her son was righteous, but he didn’t receive the natural blessing of hearing. Did he do something wrong?

You see, this is the other side of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament as it tells stories of frail humans trying to make sense of suffering. Job’s three friends made sense of his suffering by switching the axiom, “If you sin, you will suffer” to “if you suffer, you *have* sinned.” Neither of these axioms are true. The first “If you sin, you will suffer” is what Asaph wrestles with in Psalm 73, because he sees that the wicked, do in fact, prosper. And the second, “If you suffer, you have sinned” falls short for Job who lived blamelessly before God.

Friends, all of the worlds’ wisdom falls short and is silenced in the Suffering Christ. His atonement for us in more than the popular “one-ment” theory of Christ being one with us but letting us skirt out of the notion of our own sin. We have sinned. We do suffer. The two are not always linked. And in all of this—in all our sins and in all our suffering—Christ encompasses the world.

That same friend whose son suffered from hearing impairment always clung to the image of the Celtic Cross, for in it the arms of Christ extend out, beyond the world. Christ, by his dying and rising redeems our suffering and forgives our sins.

There is one more thing I want us to notice in this passage of wisdom. Let’s look again at what Asaph confesses in verses 16-17,

*But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task,  
until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I perceived their end.*

Asaph found resolution not in a theory of wisdom, but in a place. His resolution was found in the sanctuary of God. For those of us who live on the other side of Christ's resurrection, our resolution is found, not in a sanctuary, but in the person of Jesus.

Notice that the disciple Thomas, who is remember for nothing more than being "Doubting Thomas" needs to find resolution to his doubt, too. Christ honours that. He doesn't push Thomas aside. And where is it that Jesus invites Thomas? Jesus invites Thomas to touch *his* wounds, to touch *his* suffering. We're all doubting Thomas's, I feel it is safe to say. Christ does not condemn our doubts and questions, but in his risen-ness he invites us to experience his life in his suffering—by whose wounds we are healed. No wisdom of the world can compare with the glorious, scandalous, and ever-present wisdom of Jesus Christ, incarnate, suffering, risen, victorious, and present with us now through his Spirit. Jesus, the only wise God (Jude 1:25) stands at the gates and cries out from Golgotha, "*Whoever is simple, let him turn here.*" (*Proverbs 9:4*). Come friends, come and cling to the Suffering and Risen Christ.

And so to close our sermon today, let me pray the prayer written by contemporary poet, Malcolm Guite, who has given a new writing to the "O Wisdom Antiphon" with which we began this sermon.

*I cannot think unless I have been thought,  
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.  
I cannot teach except as I am taught,*

*Or break the bread except as I am broken.*  
*O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,*  
*O Light within the light by which I see,*  
*O Word beneath the words with which I speak,*  
*O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,*  
*O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,*  
*O Memory of time, reminding me,*  
*My Ground of Being, always grounding me,*  
*My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,*  
*Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,*  
*Come to me now, disguised as everything.*