

The Light of Wisdom

Sermon

- **“Where Is the One Who Is Wise?”**

P God created us. He gave us not only our physical abilities, but our intellect, our ability to learn, to grow in wisdom and knowledge. God our Creator has given us our reason and all of our senses. We have only to look around at the technology in our homes or reach into a purse or pocket for a cell phone to discover the immense variety of things that our human reason can imagine and invent. Local and world news programs daily reveal the ways in which the creative powers of human intelligence can be turned to good or to evil. Yet human knowledge and human wisdom can only go so far. They have limits. Those boundaries are apparent in a statement by the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking. The brilliant scientist offered his opinion—an opinion achieved by his human reason—on the existence of God: “We are each free to believe what we want and it is my view that the simplest explanation is there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization,” he said. “(That) There is probably no heaven and no afterlife either.” Obviously, wisdom alone has limits.

“The world did not know God through wisdom,” the apostle Paul writes. Some people, like Hawking, may choose to reject the idea of God. Others may acknowledge that there is a God or gods, but on its own, our human intellect cannot discover the truth about God. We cannot know who God is or what he truly thinks of us or what he has done to save us. Left to its own devices, our human wisdom will invent a God who is angry, yet who can be easily satisfied with our offerings, our sacrifices or with other efforts to please him. Or, our human reason may invent a God who, we imagine, could not possibly condemn anyone to eternal suffering in hell. Surely,

we imagine, he will let everyone into heaven if they try to be good. Another invented God is one who, we admit, may have created the world, but then left us alone to live in the world without his help or care. Again, as the apostle Paul writes, “The world did not know God through wisdom.”

Paul encountered this sad gap in wisdom’s powers in the city of Athens. The people of Athens valued knowledge and wisdom. They wanted to know and discover and discuss all kinds of things. They were religious people, too, and the city was filled with altars dedicated to a variety of gods. They even included an altar “to the unknown god” so no overlooked deity would feel slighted. Paul introduced the people of Athens to the God they worshiped as unknown, the true God who “made the world and everything in it.” This is the God, Paul said, who would one day judge the world by a man he has appointed, and God gave proof of that coming judgment by raising that man from the dead. Upon hearing the news of a man risen from the grave and the announcement of a day of judgment, some of the so-called wise citizens of Athens ridiculed Paul. Others, those who through the Spirit’s work became truly wise, listened to the apostle and wanted to know more.

Human wisdom cannot discover the truth about God. Human reason may acknowledge a God and Creator, but our human reason alone cannot truly know him or learn of his love for the world. God must reveal himself to us. And, he has done just that in the Person of his Son—in our crucified and risen Savior Jesus Christ. As with many of the people of Athens, the unbelieving world thinks of this message as foolishness. Yet that seemingly foolish and astonishing message—the Gospel, the good news that Jesus was crucified for our sins and raised from death—is the power of God to save us.

The stark differences in the thinking of those who do not know God, or refuse to hear His Word, and those who do know the Lord, are alluded to in today's First Reading where we are told, “darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory.” And, in our Second Reading, the language even more clearly states that it is only through Divine Wisdom that the Redeemer has been revealed to us. “The mystery was made known to me by revelation. It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit...”

The world seeks wisdom, even imposing its own brand of wisdom on God: “Surely God could have come up with a better plan to save people!” unbelievers will say. “Why should the death of one man on a cross save the world?” they might think. The world wants—it demands—signs from God: “If God is so powerful, why doesn’t he heal the sick? If God is really a loving God, why doesn’t he stop wars and disasters?” Jesus himself once told those who demanded signs of him that the only sign they would have was the sign of Jonah—just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the great fish, the crucified Savior would be buried in the heart of the earth for three days. The only sign would be the good news of Christ crucified and raised up from death.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, it is a good day to give some thought to wisdom.

On this day we remember the wise men who traveled to Bethlehem. The wise men had a different sign to follow—a star that, for them, indicated that a new king of the Jews had been born. We do not know much about the wise men. These scholars from the east probably studied the stars. They may have read ancient manuscripts. Perhaps they had studied the books of Moses, and were familiar with the prophecy from the Book of Numbers foretelling that “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” They followed the special star, but they also followed the world’s wisdom. They went to Jerusalem to find the new king of the Jews, because, of course, it is reasonable to assume that a king would be born in a palace in that city. But in Jerusalem, the priests and scribes consulted the Word of God, and found the prophecy. The new King of the Jews—the King of Kings—was not found in a palace surrounded by servants and soldiers. The new King was found in the little town of Bethlehem. There in Bethlehem the wisdom of God is revealed in the weakness of a little Child, the Child who grew up to carry our sins in his own body to the cross. It is not the sort of plan that our worldly wisdom would expect, but it is the redemptive plan of God.

In his discussion of the wisdom of the world and the foolishness of God, the apostle Paul asks, “Where is the one who is wise?” Those who are wise will join the wise men, falling down in worship before the Child of Bethlehem, bowing before the King of kings and Lord of lords. “Where is the one who is wise?” Those who are wise are led, not by a star, but by the Holy Spirit, led to believe the good news that salvation is found only through faith in Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. “Where is the one who is wise?” Those who are wise are right here, right now, in this place, gathered together to worship Christ crucified. You were not brought here by your own wisdom. The Holy Spirit, at work in the water and the Word of your baptism, called you by the Gospel. The wisdom of God has led you to Bethlehem and from there to signs that the world’s wisdom could never discover—from the manger to the cross and the empty tomb. Amen.