

**A Word of Wisdom  
Sirach 24:1-12**

**First Sunday of 2021  
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Port Williams United Baptist Church**

Well, we made it!

2020 is gone, finished caput! It is history, done with, over! We don't have to live in it anymore! Thanks be to God! Amen! Let us go forth!

In many ways that is the praise of our hearts, isn't it? I think we could get an unanimous vote that the preceding year has been one that we would prefer not to ever do again! From the tragedies that hit us in Nova Scotia, on land and on the seas, to the global pandemic that brought about fear and isolation and upheaval that we are still trying to figure out, 2020 was, well quite a year!

But it is over!

And today, on this the second Sunday of Christmas in the Christian calendar, on the first Sunday of the New Year in the Georgian calendar, we gather for worship. And if you are a regular, we know the story that we will hear. It is the Epiphany story, the so called Christmas story that Matthew tells in his gospel.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'*<sup>1</sup>

This is the Sunday when we come and hear about the Christmas star that led them across hill and vale, that appeared this year, but not here because we were clouded in. Hey, it was 2020! This is the Sunday when we sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are" all five verses and a chorus that just goes on as long as the journey took. (And are you aware that it is not in our hymnal? It doesn't matter, we know it, as well as the comic variation about exploding cigars!)

This is Epiphany Sunday!

So what is it with this reading?

Sirach?

We printed it in the worship guide because if we had pew Bibles and we asked you to turn to Sirach 24, you wouldn't find it. In fact, it isn't in the Bible that I bring to the pulpit every week. It is in the Oxford Annotated Bible that I bought in seminary and still use for my study Bible.

Sirach is found in the Apocrypha. My guess is that unless you grew up Eastern Orthodox, or Catholic, or have been to seminary this may be the first time you have ever heard of Sirach, or the Apocrypha.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:1-2. NRSV

The Apocrypha are those “in between” books found in some Bibles. To really understand we have to remember that the books of our Bible are not the only books of the Bible! There were lots of books that “didn’t make the cut.” The Bible didn’t come to us in one First Edition printed on gold tablets. It didn’t come to us from heaven in one volume. No, our Bible is a compilation of centuries of different writers, with different perspectives; different even opposing histories and theologies. It includes passages that take us into the very presence of God, and others that well, make God scratch her head and say, “What?”

That is what makes the Bible different, and I might add holy. It is a reminder that any time we fall prey into believing that we have God captured, all figured out, even in the Bible we are in danger of heresy, of making an idol.

The Apocrypha is just that warning. It is made up of 17 books that were included in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In my study Bible it takes up almost as many pages as the New Testament. It includes the same variety of genres of literature as you find in the rest of the Bible—poetry, history, amazing stories.

Controversy arose about whether they were “scripture” at the time of the Reformation over issues of theology, especially around purgatory and the efficacy of prayer. The determination was that these writing “were outside the Hebrew canon, yet they are holy writings.” In reaction to Protestant criticism, the Catholic Church accepted the Apocrypha as scripture at the Council of Trent in 1546. And so it remains today.<sup>2</sup>

A bit of Biblical history for you today! (There is more of this in our Bible Course that starts January 21 on Zoom. There is still time to sign up. Just an unsolicited plug!)

Our scripture, yes I am going to call it that, falls in line with what we find in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. This is wisdom literature that was written around 180 BCE. This is one of the books of the Bible where the author wrote his name, committed his writing to memory and his grandson eventually wrote these sayings down.<sup>3</sup>

If he were alive today and writing, he would probably be a professor of public administration. In many ways this book reads like a modern day text of business ethics. His goal is to instruct the young in the art of living well in the bt sense of that phrase. His students will seek careers in public service as scribes, administrators, diplomats. He encourages frugality, hard work, honesty for the poor rather than getting rich.<sup>4</sup> Sounds like something we should read more often don’t you think?

As I was reading through it this week there were many verse that hit me as being so appropriate for our times. Like,

*The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer.*

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<sup>2</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press:New York, 1991) iv AP

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bibletexts.com/glossary/sir.htm>

*To take away a neighbour's living is to commit murder; to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.<sup>5</sup>*

Or

*My child, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if his mind fails, be patient with him; because you have all your faculties do not despise him.*

*For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against your sins; in the day of your distress it will be remembered in your favour; like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away. Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer, and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord.<sup>6</sup> (Alison and Savannah, pay attention! I didn't make this up!)*

This book is filled with that kind of wisdom. You have probably seen the meme that says “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not put it in a fruit salad.” Wisdom in the Bible is different from intelligence or knowledge. It is not intelligence but was related to and even drawn from that spirit which in the very beginning gave order to creation. Wisdom was the ordering principle of the cosmos, bringing order out of chaos.

And how much do we need that today!

We live in a world where chaos so often seems to reign. As we move into this new season, as we do the much harder work of undecorating our homes, of finding all those things that we put away for the holidays, as we get ready to resume our normal schedule—as if there is such a thing—doesn't it seem that chaos is in charge of our lives?

This is the time of the year when we seem to recognize that, and so we respond with resolutions, promises that we make to ourselves, to the cosmos that we will bring about some order to our world. We are going to exercise more (I went for a walk on Friday, part of my attempt;) we are going to eat more healthy, less junk. (Haven't done that good on that one yet!). We are going to pray more, meditate daily. In short we are going to do all the things that we know we need to do, and yet....

May I suggest that this year we seek wisdom. In the Bible wisdom is often synonymous with God. The story is told of how an angel went to a peasant saying, “*God wants to be revealed to you in whatever manner you desire. How do you wish to see God?*”

*Scratching his head and puzzling a long time, the peasant finally said, “I am a poor man and not worthy to see God face to face. But if it is God's will to be revealed to me, let it be in those things which I am familiar. Let me see God in the earth I plough, the water I drink, the food I eat. Let me see the presence of God in the faces of my family, neighbors, and —if God deems it as good for myself and others—even in my own reflection as well.”*

*And God granted the peasant his wish and he lived a long and happy life.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Sirach 34:25-27. NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Sirach 3:12-16. NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. (Scribner:New York, 1996.) 37

See, most of the time wisdom isn't some elusive trait that we have to chase after. Many times it is just taking the time to wait, to open our eyes to seeing the holy all around us. It shows up in when we are reminded to Keep calm and Carry On. Sometimes we just need to stop. Breathe and re-adjust our lives and then move on.

I may have mentioned that I have a huge fan-crush on Kate Bowler. She is a theology professor at Duke Divinity School, a Canadian from Alberta, mother of a little boy, and a person dealing with cancer. She wrote one of my favorite books of recent years, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, and has a podcast by the same name.

This past week she was the interviewee, and gave an answer to how she just gets through a day in which it feels like the chaos is winning. Her answer,

*I find in moments like that, days like that, where the future just feels impossible, that it's OK. It's OK not to be able to look ahead right now that like maybe tomorrow can be its own problem. Today is going to need some work.*

*When I found that I had like an impossible day, sometimes I like to make like a few rules. Like one was that I was going to check in with myself partway through the day to figure out if I was pretending that I was invincible, probably. And whether there was just like any, like, half breath there I could take. So even if it was just like five minutes sitting in the bathroom with my back against the door so that nobody could come in and just turning the lights off, sometimes just to take a second to check in with your with your spirit, just to say, like, am I OK? Is there anything that I can like, take it down a notch?*

*Then I'd make a rule where I'd have to shut it down early. So I knew I didn't have to get through like until 11 p.m. I could just get through until like after dinner.*

*I would make like a no sad thoughts rule. So no important existential decisions or conversations after seven p.m. things that just feel gentle. I guess maybe the last thing, too, is that when it feels like there's there's nothing to do but the next hard thing, just looking for a little completely stupid things that bring you joy. Like right now, for me, it's Hallmark Christmas movies. So much joy. I remember sometimes for a bit there, it was like weird office supplies, erasers that were silly or little dumb sayings I could put up on a bulletin board in front of me that made me laugh almost like a picture of Kermit the Frog, just like things that remind you that you're not just a series of tasks that feel impossible. You're still you and you need shelter and care and like a little joy in the midst of all this.<sup>8</sup>*

There is great wisdom in that! Take a break to catch your breath. Give yourself grace. Enjoy the good that is right in your midst—a Hallmark movie, putting a picture of something that gives you joy as your computer screensaver, (This is mine!)

What are the ways you are going to seek wisdom this year? How are you going to try to bring order out of the chaos of your life? Maybe it is continuing to do the things that have sustained you, but perhaps it is something a bit different, listening to a different voice, reading a part of the Bible that you haven't read before, or even knew existed. I would love to know. Share it in the comments below, or drop me an email.

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<sup>8</sup><https://katebowler.com/podcasts/ask-kate-anything-season-five-finale/>

Perhaps we can just begin by admitting that we don't know, that we don't have God captured, figured out and be open to the ways God is coming to us this year. That is the wisdom that Frederich Buchner shared with me yesterday in a daily quote from his writings. It is one of my favorites, and I thought that maybe it was providential that it came as I was finishing this sermon.

*He writes, "If God speaks, it is into our personal lives that he speaks...He speaks not just through the sounds we hear, of course, but through events in all their complexity and variety, through the harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoint of all that happens... Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."*

I think there is room in the Bible for that too!

That is my prayer for you, for us.

May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to receive God, today, this year.

Amen