

Wisdom for the Road

Based on Psalm 26

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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I bet various people in your life have imparted wisdom to you, maybe in the form of sage sayings. One of my family members was fond of saying, "Everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time." I have heard my elders in long time married partnerships advise the younger ones, "Never go to bed angry." I've heard it said by carpenters, "Measure twice. Cut once." My father is famous for his gem of wisdom for times when things are not at all going well, he says, stoically, "Press on regardless!"

Any gems of wisdom you learned from your elders? Share them in these 30 seconds.

The imparting of wisdom is likely as key in your life as it has been in mine. We need to know the best way to brush our teeth, to wash our clothes, to share, to live a life. It's no wonder that wisdom is such a prominent feature in the Hebrew scripture. Our life depends on one generation imparting wisdom to the next and vice versa.

In the Bible, wisdom literature and wisdom sayings are guidelines for faith, a kind of instruction manual in how to live the good life. The words from Deuteronomy, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Dt30:19) This passage captures the essence of wisdom literature; it aims to set us on the right path. It especially comes in handy when we feel lost.

Often, wisdom is shared in times when we especially need it. I was reminded that everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time when I was feeling intimidated by someone whom I perceived as more powerful and capable. When I am feeling like I'm in an uphill battle in life, I hear a calming voice in my head say, "One step at a time."

Tension (or maybe the potential for conflict) is a time when wisdom gets passed on from elder to younger. The larger context for Psalm 26 is conflict. From the beginning, there is a cry for vindication. Something is wrong. Some scholars think Psalm 26 was written after the Israel was sent into exile, and the writer or writers were feeling particularly challenged—a perfect time for wisdom!

While the psalm is traditionally seen as a type of liturgy, there is a great deal of evidence that it is a piece of wisdom literature. It has some signatures of literature found in the Book of Proverbs, especially in its themes and form. For example, Psalm 26 has a circular structure which is a characteristic of wisdom literature. It is very carefully crafted, let's take a brief look at this:

So, verses 1–3 have to do with right walking. We have spoken in this church about Right Relations with our indigenous sisters and brothers. Being just and truthful and respectful in our journeys.

Verses 4–5 discuss how the psalmist disassociates from wickedness. We in the United Church might choke on words like “wickedness.” We tend to speak language of love and tolerance, but then we find a friend posting something vile on Facebook or we see a leader in the news whose words or actions represent what we consider, honestly, reprehensible.

How do we dissociate ourselves in modern times from that?

In our response to what we perceive as wicked, how do we not sink to the level of wickedness ourselves?

Verses 6–8 talks about ritual purity and liturgy. What is our United Church version of Ritual Purity? *Maybe, centring ourselves so that we bring our best selves whenever we worship or otherwise gather in Jesus’ name?*

And then the psalm circles back to the beginning. Verses 9–10 have to do with how the psalmist isn’t destroyed by the wicked.

And verses 11–12 return to right walking. That idea of “right walking” or “being on the right route” or the potential to go one of “two ways—the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked” is a core metaphor in wisdom literature.

We hear it in Deuteronomy, chapter 30 where it says this: “Life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.” Some believe such a choice is suggested in Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” There’s never a doubt in the scripture that we are on a journey. From the Garden of Eden to the book of Revelation and all points in between, God’s people are on the move.

Psalm 26 is no less busy. The psalmist talks about walking in faithfulness, going around the altar, walking in integrity, standing on level ground as opposed to (in verses 4 and 5) sitting with the worthless or the wicked – hitting a dead end. Righteousness is going with God. Psalm 26 is truly wisdom for the road.

The wisdom we hear from the old words of Psalm 26 may sound like the wisdom that you thought about at the beginning of this Message, as you shared with your neighbour. It might sound like something your aunt or your mother or your friend shared with you in a time of uncertainty or stress. In our congregational life, it might sound like the wisdom that comes when we pray or sing in one voice, or when we sit around our decision-making tables and decide where to direct our human resources and financial resources that they might have the most positive impact on our community and world.

That’s how I would invite you to listen to the wisdom in these psalms—as though a trusted friend or mentor or respected congregant was passing the wisdom on to us.

Listen to the paraphrase of Psalm 26 in that knowing, loving tone:

Go with God.

Move with faithfulness.

Don’t waste your time on stuff that detracts you from what is holy.

Sing.

Be thankful.

Wonder.

Have integrity.

Stay grounded.
Go with God.

Now, each one of us here knows that our ability to receive words of wisdom is directly proportional to the venue in which they are shared. For example, some wisdom may be imparted to us across a kitchen table over a steaming cup of coffee. Or wisdom may be given when we are sweating buckets of distress and the words shared with us hit us right in the heart and we are instantly calm.

Where do you imagine you would be, to be most open to hearing God's words of wisdom from Psalm 26? When are you most receptive to hearing such words of wisdom?

Maybe during a quiet moment by a lake? Or in the midst of the joyful bustle of friends over Thanksgiving dinner? Maybe in a moment of prayer when you are like a child curled up on Jesus' lap as described in Gospel reading we spoke about in Time Up Front with the kids.

Wherever you think you are most apt to be impressed by God's wisdom, imagine being there. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable. Listen to the Spirit speak to you now:

Go with God.

Move with faithfulness.

Don't waste your time on stuff that detracts you from what is holy.

Sing.

Be thankful.

Wonder.

Have integrity.

Stay grounded.

Go with God.

Amen.