

“With All Your Getting, Get Wisdom”

Proverbs 9:10; Responsive Reading: “Wisdom”¹

This is a moment for which we’ve all waited for a long time. It’s a holy moment. It’s an exciting moment! It’s a moment full of hope and anticipation, as together we wonder what God is up to at CBF.

You’ve wondered for nearly two years who your next Pastor would be, and what that person would be like. For about that same length of time, Jill and I have been wondering whether God was getting us ready for another chapter of ministry, and if so, where that might be, and what that congregation would be like.

As we gather this morning, we know more than we once did, and I’m very grateful for that, but much remains to be discovered. The journey of getting to know one another and of sharing life and ministry together over the next decade or so is only a few days old, and many adventures lie ahead!

Now when we wonder what God is up to at CBF, we can be sure that what God is up to here will be congruent with what God is up to elsewhere, and it seems to me that God’s overarching purposes on planet earth are really only two: first, God wants to use the experiences of our lives to so shape our character as individuals that we will be willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with God; and second, God wants to join our lives together in a fabric of community that only God can weave.

And because God wants all people to experience these two things, you and I, who have already been blessed with personal relationship with our Creator through faith in Jesus, have been given a divine commission to take this Good News to our neighbors in Columbia, in Howard County, in Maryland, in these United States, and to the very ends of the earth.

As we gather on this second Sunday of 2012, our first Sunday together as Pastor and People, we’ve just passed Epiphany (January 6), and you probably know that Epiphany commemorates the arrival of the Magi sometime around Jesus’ second birthday, and that it concludes what we call “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” As we move from Advent and Christmas into a New Year and into a new journey together, I’d like to take the idea of “getting” that’s so prevalent during those seasons and add to it the idea “with all your getting, get wisdom.”

I suspect that these days around the “hinge” of the year represent one of those times when most of us do some assessment of where we are, where we’ve been, and where we’re going. Some of us enter 2012 with gladness. We’re looking forward being married this year, to the arrival of a new baby, to graduation, to beginning a new job, to a big anniversary, or to any number of other exciting things. We’re eager for what’s ahead!

Others of us are experiencing very different emotions this morning. As we sit here in worship, we find ourselves in a time of illness, of misfortune, of disappointment, of grief, or of family disintegration. We’ve finished school but haven’t yet found the employment for which we trained. As The Great Recession lumbers on, some of us have lost our jobs or have recently learned that our jobs are in jeopardy. For some of us, our children or our marriages are in crisis. From where we stand, the future looks pretty painful.

It’s crucial to remember that whatever our circumstances this morning, God intends to work through those very circumstances to deepen spiritual wisdom in our lives—if we choose

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on January 8, 2012.

to allow that to happen. In these days of transition at the hinge of the year, I'd like to invite you to join me in examining our lives through what I call "the four lenses of wisdom." The first of these lenses is one that looks toward the **PAST**.

Many of us spend at least a little time during the Christmas season gazing backward on the year that has now come to a close, and it seems to me that wisdom has three components with respect to the past. These components are *gratitude*, *new understanding*, and *repentance*.

As we consider those things that went well in 2011, our first response might best be gratitude. Gratitude is the acknowledgement that, whatever we may have contributed ourselves, the largest components of any positive outcomes in our lives are really the twin foundations of God's mercy on the one hand, and the gracious investment of other people in our lives on the other. Gratitude recognizes that we're always and forever standing on the shoulders of others. We never stand on the ground itself.

Second, with respect to new understanding, I find it helpful to remember a question I learned from Dr. Mahan Siler several years ago. As he opened a weekend of reflection for several pastors, Mahan asked us to consider the question, "What's clearer to you now than it was at this time last year?" Isn't that a nice way to put it? "What's *clearer* to you now?" How would you answer that?

What has happened in your spirit since this time last year? Are you more hopeful or more despairing now than you were then? Are you more confident or more fearful? More content or more rebellious? More trusting or more suspicious? More compassionate or more resentful? More bitter or more forgiving? More engaged in life or more isolated? More proud or more grateful? More indifferent or more loving? Does God seem closer or farther away? What's clearer to you now?

Finally, after gratitude and new understanding comes repentance. You and I are never going to be free from sin or from making mistakes, and deepening wisdom means that we learn from mistakes we've already made and avoid repeating them . . . or at least we make them less often. Beyond this, for those things that haven't gone so well, especially those things that ran aground precisely because of our contributions to them, our response may need to be repentance.

There may be persons whose forgiveness we need to seek before we can have a clear spirit about the past, and the Good News of the Gospel is that the healing of forgiveness really is available to us, pressed down, shaken together, and running over! We don't have to keep carrying the dead weight of our past failures . . . but we do have to allow God's forgiveness to cover them and to release us from them.

The second lens of wisdom looks forward to the **FUTURE**. As 2011 becomes 2012, the forward look is perhaps the most natural one, and the Good News of the Gospel is that we are both set free from the past and set free for the future. C.S. Lewis was fond of saying that God's invitation is always to "Come in farther! Come up higher!"

If we're looking forward to the future, we may feel as Michelangelo is said to have done when asked about what he thought was his very best work. He immediately replied, "My *next* one." It's wonderful indeed to have such zeal, optimism, and hope for the future, but our optimism needs to stay grounded gratitude, lest our confidence and hope become arrogance. Real wisdom is consistently characterized by both humility and gratitude.

On the other hand, for those of us who suffer this morning, the future may seem too painful to contemplate. Like Job, we can imagine no end to our suffering. In such dark

seasons of my own life, I've found comfort in a prayer written by Thomas Merton, the famous monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardstown, Kentucky. Our Catholic friends sometimes call this "The Prayer of Desolation":

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."²

There have been seasons of my life when that prayer was all that kept me going, all that kept me connected to God. And if darkness is your lot today, perhaps it will help you, too.

Another source of strength for me has been a quote from Louise Haskins, famously read in a radio address by King George VI of England at the end of 1939, just before World War II began: "I said to the man who stood by the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'"³

If this is a season of darkness for you, remember that, even in darkness, God's promise is steadfast: "*For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future*" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The third lens of wisdom is the lens of the PRESENT. This lens focuses on where we perceive ourselves to be today. Since the near end of the future is always grasped in the present, we need some idea about what wisdom looks like in the present tense, and it seems to me that three components of such wisdom might include living in holiness, living in God's Presence, and living as what I call Great Commission Christians.

I suspect that the idea of holiness is rather a slippery concept for many of us. While I have no corner on definitions, I like to think of holiness as a life lived in constant view of the question, "What would Jesus do?" Can you even begin to imagine how our lives might be different if they were really guided by that question?

Second, while there are many ways to describe living in God's Presence, I tend to focus on Jesus' teaching that "*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

When a branch is connected to a vine, the vine's nutrients and life flow from the vine into the branch, and fruit is produced according to the vine's nature. When our lives are deeply connected to Jesus, our relationship with Him is such that His life flows into and through us, and fruit is produced by our lives according to His nature.

Third, if we live in holiness and if we live in God's Presence, living as "Great Commission Christians" will probably happen all by itself.⁴ What Jesus actually said in what we call "the Great Commission" is "*as you are going, make disciples of all nations*" (Matthew

² Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1976), p. 83.

³ M. Louise Haskins, "God Knows," cited in John Bartlett, *The Shorter Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, ed. Christopher Morley and Kathleen Sproul (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1937; Pocket Books Edition, Doubleday, 1953), p. 158.

⁴ αὐτοματῆ ("automatically"; Mark 4:27).

28:19). That is, as you and I are going about our normal lives, we're to live and to speak in such ways that we make it easier for others to know our Lord.

"As you are going," this morning, what do you know about the spiritual condition of your family members, your extended family, your neighbors, and the people you work with? If each of us, as followers of Jesus, were to witness in life and word just to those persons who are already in the circles of our lives, we would transform the world!

Well, we've considered wisdom lenses that look backward, forward, and all around us. The fourth and final lens of wisdom that I want to mention this morning is the lens that looks UPWARD toward heaven. This lens is really a "skylight" that illumines life in the other three tenses so that we can see our lives somewhat as God sees them.

The heavenward lens of wisdom allows us to live our lives today in the light of eternity. Jesus has promised to return, and persons of wisdom live "on tiptoe," eagerly watching and listening for signs of His coming even as we're about the work of pushing back the Darkness and bringing in God's Kingdom in the world-as-it-is.

So it is that the backward look, the forward look, the present look, and the upward look all find their focus in the year 2012. What will we do with it? How will we grow in wisdom? For those of us who are presently in pain, we may simply pray the prayer of King Jehoshaphat: "*We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you*" (2 Chronicles 20:12).

For those of us in happier situations, we might do well to remember the words of Jeremiah: *This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom, or the powerful boast of their strength, or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on the earth"* (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Well, two short stories and we're done. In Irving Stone's novel, *The Agony & the Ecstasy* (1961), there's a scene in which Michelangelo's friend Soggi tries to persuade him to abandon his study of sculpture and to pursue a more profitable trade. "After all," Soggi notes, "sculpture is the last art form to be commissioned by the wealthy families of Florence. There is no money in it and no future. It is the last of the luxuries, at the very bottom of the list." Michelangelo answers, "Sculpture is at the top of my list, Soggi. In fact, there is no list. I say 'sculpture,' and I'm finished."

Let me put that picture in another frame. A young woman who had recently chosen to receive Jesus as her Savior was asked what this experience meant to her. She thought for a few moments and then gave a very wise answer: "Before I was saved I tried to please myself, and I was not at all sorry for my sins. Really, I did not consider myself at all sinful. But since I gave my life to Jesus, in everything I do I try to please Him."

It would be difficult to make wisdom any clearer, would it not? *With all your getting, get wisdom.*

Wisdom

Reader One: *When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Genesis 3:6).*

Reader Two: ***My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding . . . and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God (Proverbs 2:1-5).***

Reader One: *Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her (Proverbs 3:13-15).*

Reader Two: ***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10).***

Reader One: *This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom, or the strong boast of their strength, or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23-24).*

Reader Two: ***And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. . . . When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him?" (Luke 2:52; Mark 6:2).***

Reader One: *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Ephesians 1:17).*

Reader Two: ***"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7:12).***

Reader One: The Word of God for the People of God.

Reader Two: **Thanks be to God!**