

“Who is Wise?”

1 Kings 3:5-15

James 3:13-18

The reading from the epistle of James starts out, “who is wise and understanding among you?” If you’re thinking about growing and moving forward together as a community, it’s a great place to start. First, you figure out who the wise ones are and then you follow their sage guidance. It only leaves the question right where you started...who is wise among you?

This week I asked a bunch of people what image came to mind when they thought of a wise person. Many described someone who was older, with long white hair and, for men, flowing beards. Some specified grandparents or parents – beloved professors, pastors, or friends. Others thought of famous people like Mr. Rogers, John Lewis, Mother Teresa, Maya Angelou, and Ann Richards. Still others thought of fictional characters like Yoda. What is wisdom? Is it the one who is quiet and listens much or is it the storyteller who patiently teaches from the store of their own life experience? Is it the child who overflows with unjaded enthusiasm for the world or a loving pet whose love and loyalty fill our days?

For some reason, my mind wandered back to FernGully – that movie from 1992 that was a fable about caring for the earth. The main fairy, Crysta, is quite young and can’t get her magic to work. There’s an old fairy with a kind voice who teaches Crysta throughout the film. Her name is Magi and she is precisely who I thought of when I asked others about wisdom.

She begins the movie by telling Crysta the stories of her people’s past – how they used to live in harmony with humans, but the balance of nature had been disrupted. Magi was the one who trapped the evil spirit of destruction inside an enchanted tree. As Magi talks and teaches, she floats by and flowers bloom in a trail behind her. When she touches a plant, it comes to life and grows. Crysta doesn’t know how to do all that Magi can do. She’s frustrated and impatient – she

is over-anxious with each setback, but Magi is patient and calm. She keeps repeating the wisdom of the fairies and encourages Crysta to “help it grow.” She says: “Remember: all the magic of creation exists within a single tiny seed.”ⁱ

Over the course of the movie, Magi gives her life to keep the forest alive. Yet, the main characters continue to hear her wise words echoing in their heads long after she is gone. She says, “Look for the hero inside yourself, Crysta. Look to the good and loving heart in you and all others. For just as every seed holds the power and magic of creation, so, too, do you and every other creature in this world.”ⁱⁱ Ultimately, Crysta grows up. She grows into her powers and is able to bring flourishing just as Magi had done.

It is a bit of a silly example, but this film echoes so much of what wisdom is. First, it comes from what has been learned – not just in one life, but in generations and generations, centuries, millennia of human knowing. Wisdom comes from stories more ancient than we could ever tell. It is the wise person who has learned from this pool of knowing and brings that insight into their own lives and shares it with others. A wise person tells the stories that tell us who we are. It is less about a specific experience or a well-placed fact to sway an argument. The stories of wisdom help us to unfold where we came from, what our values have been, who we are right now, and who we hope to be. When a wise one tells us a story, it is not frivolous – it is grounding and transformative at the same time. Reaching out for wisdom is an act of humility because it recognizes the limits of our own understanding and seeks that which has become known through countless lives, countless successes, countless failures.

So often when we speak of wisdom, what we really mean is someone who is smart or clever. We lose the dimension of rootedness in our history, in our traditions, even our own faith.

By contrast, when the Bible speaks of wisdom, it is very clear that wisdom means knowledge and truth that comes from God.

In our reading from 1 Kings, Solomon is new to the kingship. His father has just died, but before he did he named Solomon as his successor – even though he had brothers who were older than him. Add to that – Solomon may have only been about fifteen years old at the time.ⁱⁱⁱ After shoring up his power a little bit, this dream that Solomon had was one of the first things that happened in his reign as king. God says, “ask what I should give you.”

Solomon has great power, angry siblings, and a vast nation to rule. God shows up in a dream to give him a blessing to help him get started. His first response, though, is not braggish or demanding. No – Solomon marvels at how generous God was in showing love to his father David. He recognizes that his father’s faithfulness and righteousness pleased God and that Solomon’s own position on the throne is a part of that blessing. But he freely admits that he is young, naïve, uncertain. He is eager to do a good job, pleasing to God, but he doesn’t know what to do with a people so special to God’s heart. So, the most important thing to Solomon is wisdom and understanding – the ability to tell good from evil so that he can guide the people to good.

And God was so happy. You can’t help but think of the parent who’s tried so hard to steer their child to goodness and they come to that moment when the child spontaneously decides to do something good. God was so happy that Solomon asked for wisdom rather than a long life, lots of wealth, or military victory that God grants him all of the above. We might think that God was testing Solomon and that he chose wisely and so he passed. Or maybe God was inclined to give him his heart’s desire no matter what. Either way, Solomon asked for wisdom, for the ability to tell right from wrong. The irony should not be lost on us that this young man was

already wise enough to ask for wisdom in the first place. When Solomon awoke, he worshiped God and he threw a great feast for his servants.

Coming back to the epistle of James, we ask again, “who is wise and understanding among you?” The answer isn’t “your teacher,” “your parents,” “your pastors” – not because it can’t be those people, but because wisdom is so much broader and richer and deeper than that. The scriptures teach us that wisdom comes from God and so is offered to all of us and can be learned from any of us. It is on us to be open, to listen, to learn, to grow. Surely we all have our favorite teachers, ones we know personally and famous ones we learn from from afar. Still, they are channels of wisdom and not wisdom itself. When they pass on to be with God, we can still hear their voices teaching and shaping us.

So we remember that wisdom is not a detached, abstract fact or figure. It is what we have learned from God about who we are and whose we are. We show that we are wise by living good lives – not perfect lives, but lives that reflect, “gentleness born of wisdom.” We show that we paid attention to what God taught us when we are not consumed by craving jealousy or selfishness or an addiction to lies and deception. We show that we are made in God’s image when we are modest, peace-seeking, reasonable, patient, concerned with fairness, trusting in God and ready to act in righteousness, merciful, generous, whole-hearted, genuine, sincere.

We live in a time when many voices seek to teach us and shape us. They want to remake us as people of fear, people of anger, people of uncaring disregard of others, people who brazenly know everything already and do not need to hear any other voices. But this is not wisdom – this is not from God. When things are as chaotic and uncertain as they are right now, it is all too easy to abandon the softness of wisdom in favor of the seemingly solid feel of certainty. There is, indeed, a vulnerability in choosing wisdom – that is undeniable. But God centers us in

wisdom and Christ leads the way forward to a new-old fellowship with old-new possibilities.

Here is a challenge for us: we must not let ourselves be undone when the fields of life seem to lay empty around us. Instead, scripture tells us that, “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” Where we see emptiness and detriment, God shows us that we can and must sow peace in order to reap a harvest of righteousness.

Take a moment today to remember the way that wisdom has whispered through your life. Hear the voices of your greatest teachers...Reflect on the moments when you were, perhaps, wise yourself... Hold on to the hope that wisdom brings. Who are you? Whose are you? Who can we become following Christ together? Amen.

ⁱ https://transcripts.fandom.com/wiki/FernGully:_The_Last_Rainforest

ⁱⁱ https://transcripts.fandom.com/wiki/FernGully:_The_Last_Rainforest

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon>