“Welcome Wisdom”
as a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
regarding James 3:13-18
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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“Who among you is wise?” asks James, and we all wish we could say, “I am, I am!” yet we do not dare raise our hand lest the teacher call on us and we have to prove it.

James is a man who likes his proof. “Show by your life,” he says here, and earlier he said, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” This guy has a bone to pick with inauthenticity.

It isn’t enough to claim you have wisdom and understanding. James believes wisdom looks a particular way. If you have wisdom, it will show. Now, brace yourselves, academicians, none of wisdom’s features have much to do with the intellect. Mostly wisdom has to do with attitude and approach. Wisdom is peaceable, wisdom is pure, wisdom is gentle, wisdom is merciful, wisdom is good. I think this means you can have an answer that is technically right, but you can execute it in an unwise manner all the same.

What is the path to attaining wisdom? My hunch is that wisdom is a thing we’d all like to have, but we may not be willing to go the route it takes to get there.

In the opening of the book of James, he writes, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you.”

It sounds like one of the paths to wisdom takes you through the heart of suffering. First of all, I want to be clear that I am decidedly NOT of the belief that God causes pain just so we’ll learn a lesson, like Sunday School with a sadistic twist. I do believe that when we suffer—whether it is of our own making or mistreatment by others or sheer misfortune—we have the opportunity to grow stronger and wiser, or we have the opportunity to shrink and to shrivel. I think James is suggesting that suffering is your soil—you either bury yourself coffin-like in it or you spread your roots and search for nutrients.

I’m gonna assume that when James recommends we “consider it nothing but joy” when we face trials, that this is a bit of hyperbole on the lips of James, literal as he may often be. I’m gonna guess that when James stubbed his toe, he didn’t break out in exclamations of sheer delight. He didn’t laugh if he broke his leg; he didn’t skip grief and grin his way through funerals. But he did make it far enough into his grief to get all the way to acceptance, and he discovered that remarkable place past sorrow where beautiful things can sprout from decay.
Getting all the way from the first shocks of heartache to the budding of wisdom isn’t easy. When I suffer, I’m not so interested in wisdom. The cry for wisdom is completely drowned out in most cases by an obsessive need for relief. I want relief from my problems more than I want wisdom, and surely I’m not the only one. Isn’t this why we drink too much, shop too much, Netflix too much, eat potato chips too much? Relief, please! We need escape!

James says if you ask for wisdom, God will give it. In my experience, if you ask for relief, you mostly don’t get it. It is often true that I’d rather have a genie than a God. I want someone to fix my mishaps, give me stuff, and take away my pain. When God offers wisdom for maneuvering the complexities and disappointments of life, I’m liable to resent the offer for wisdom because what I want is magic. I want a wand that whisks it all away, replaces hurt with happiness lickety-split. I just cannot understand why God will not grant my wishes, and to tell you the truth, when I survey the suffering world, I really do not understand God’s seeming silence. What I have found though, is that while relief seldom comes as quickly or intensely as I long for, the wisdom to carry on is nearly always there, if I pay attention.

There’s this fascinating TED talk by Eleanor Longden, a woman who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in college when she suddenly began to hear voices that were not there. When Eleanor sought medical attention, doctors began working aggressively to fix her problem of voices. In response to treatment, Eleanor began rapidly declining, her voices grew increasingly hostile and bizarre, and she lived a tortured and confused life.

But after a few years, she began to take a whole new approach to the voices. She began to believe what she had always suspected—that the voices weren’t her enemy at all, but that they were present to try and help her access untapped and unprocessed emotions. The voices were her allies, if she learned to work with them instead of against them. They had shown up in her life in response to trauma, and as Eleanor put it, the voices were a sane reaction to insane circumstances. Eventually Eleanor developed a working relationship with her voices, made a full recovery from her tormented existence, and went on to earn several degrees in psychology.

Her story makes for fascinating case study on ways to approach pain and disruption in our lives. We can fight it tooth and nail. Or we can ask what it has to teach us. If you’ve read my book, you may know I love the poem, “Guesthouse,” about letting pain in. This poem taught me how to interact with my grief and my anger in a healthier way. Rumi writes,

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

It’s not that Eleanor gave in to the voices and let them dominate her. It’s that she figured out a way to respect the voices as an unexpected but possibly valuable part of her life. As an experiment, I’ve now been trying this approach with my depression. What does it have to tell me about myself? Might I befriend the melancholy, rather than begrudging its invasion in my life? How does it change my perspective if I don’t treat the depression as enemy?

I am not suggesting that mental illness has a simple fix, or that pain is really your best buddy in disguise. I know better than that. I don’t mean we can eliminate discomfort simply by extending a friendly hand to it. I’m only suggesting that when we are teachable, it is possible for our pain to take on new dimensions, that there is a wisdom available to us, even in, or perhaps most when we are in the darkest hour. I find that when I soften my drive for relief and try out a bit of acceptance, though pain often rushes in full throttle, wisdom is close on its heels, and to my even greater surprise, sometimes so is joy.

Now, there is a second thing that gets in the way of my wisdom, and this one is less heavy but no less true. What I am referring to now is not my dizzying need for relief, but my blinding drive to always win. I don’t know about you, but when I play a game, I’m in it for the kill. Turns out this can be counterproductive to a wise disposition. I don’t really mean my competitive nature in sports or in games so much as I mean my competitive approach to life. I’ve got to win, to be the best, to compare, compare, compare. I’ve just got to succeed. Only James tells us that envy and ambition are bound to throw our wisdom out of whack.

The disciples are caught up in this competitive drive as well, arguing about who is the best and the greatest, but Jesus just rolls his eyes, refuses to award any trophies, and takes a child into his lap. The child is the sermon. The child who comes without a CV or any titles to his name, the child who cannot yet complete her multiplication tables or even pronounce her r’s, the child who comes just the way he is because he hasn’t learned how to imitate yet, comes just the way she is because she hasn’t been conditioned to perform yet, this is the one Jesus embraces and says, “If you welcome her, you welcome me.” This is a word of wisdom, if you’re willing to hear it.

In Hope for the Flowers, which is like a storybook for grown-ups, Trina Paulus tells the story of a pillar of caterpillars climbing on top of each other, trying to reach the sky. No one really knows what’s up there, but it must be good since everyone is fighting so dang hard to get there.
Many a caterpillar has died trying. Now you have to step on the other caterpillars to make it, but that’s just the way it is.

Until one little caterpillar decides she just cannot do it anymore. She lets herself tumble down the pillar and abandon the mad scramble, not knowing what on earth she will do now. She wanders listlessly, unclear about what is to come next, and that is when she stumbles across a cocoon and discovers her destiny. I’ll let you imagine what happens next, but more than that, I’ll let you imagine what would happen to us if we abandoned the mad scramble and set out to find something else instead. If we followed the call of a deeper wisdom, where would we end up, and would it be somewhere more fabulous than climbing the ladder ever allowed us to dream of?

Parker Palmer tells the story of how he was on the verge of accepting a position as a college president. He was very proud of this advancement in his career, but like a good Quaker, he called together a clearness committee to help him discern whether he should take the job when it was officially offered to him. The committee asked him many questions about the job and his vision for it, which he answered skillfully. Then one person asked him, “What would you like most about being a president?”

This simple question caused Parker to stumble. He fumbled around saying, “Well, I wouldn’t like this, and I wouldn’t like that,” until the questioner gently interrupted him, “May I remind you that I asked what you would most like?”

Again, Parker tried to answer, “I also wouldn’t like this part, and I wouldn’t like that part . . .”

“Parker, what would you most like?”

Sheepishly he gave the truest answer he knew, “I guess what I’d like the most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.”

The Quakers let Parker think on his answer for a minute, and finally one of them asked, “Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your name in the paper?”

Parker Palmer finally recognized that being a college president really wasn’t his calling, wasn’t even what he really wanted, that he had been following his ego like a puppy dog and forgot altogether to pay attention to his true nature. He realized he would have taken the job to prove himself rather than giving honestly from his center.

How would you answer if a clearness committee asked you: What is blocking the door to your wisdom? Can you pause a moment and renew your hospitality to those qualities of wisdom: peace, mercy, and gentleness? Might you welcome your inner child to the table of your decision-making and see what that voice has to say? When you’re desperate for relief, might you ask also for wisdom?

May the wisdom from above break through to us all. May we tell her she is most welcome. Amen.
Eleanor Longden, “The Voices in My Head,” http://www.ted.com/talks/eleanor_longden_the Voices_in_my_head
