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## **Send in the Clowns**

*Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38*

Is it just me or does Wisdom seem a little cranky in today's Hebrew scripture? I mean no sooner are we told that her presence is difficult to miss than we are scolded for failing to heed her words. Indeed, no less than 10 of the 14 verses we read from Proverbs this morning are a form of rebuke.

It almost seems a forgone conclusion that Wisdom's relationship with us is more antagonistic than anything else. Just take a glance at the verbs attributed to her in the text. She will laugh at, mock, ignore, and abandon us. Leaving us to our own devices even as they lead to death and destruction.

At the risk of playing into gender tropes, I will confess that I'd hoped this Biblical representation of the divine feminine would be, well, more *nurturing*. That in her words there might be some tenderness to counteract the harsh, domineering, and even violent language we often find in scripture's mostly male-centered depictions of God.

I hoped that she might offer us some comfort in these difficult days, but instead what she brings is a reckoning. I longed for softer words, but what she offers is truth—the texture of which depends entirely on our level of resistance to it.

Wisdom, it seems, is hard to ignore but easy to miss.

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There she is at the center of human life, at the great crossroads of power, in the public square, raising her voice. And yet, for most of this passage, she is as distant from us as one who mocks.

There is a bleak contrast between the security and ease Wisdom guarantees those who listen to her and the violence and calamity she promises those who won't.

Indeed, this passage is one of those occasions where the characteristics scripture gives to the divine deeply unsettle me.

Yet if we're too quick to accept either of these outcomes (or their attendant images of the divine) as fixed or inevitable, we miss the message their contrast offers, and that is this: **it's up to us**, friends. Our relationship with Wisdom is *ours* to define.

The choice before us is clear, but is ours to make.

Read in this way, the first chapter of Proverbs is less a foregone conclusion than a reckoning with our agency. It sets squarely the decision before us: Will we listen to what Wisdom has to say? Or will we wait until it's too late? Will we acknowledge her presence at the center of our life together? Or will we have to eat the bitter fruit of regret that grows out of ignoring her cries?

At the heart of her message, and the Proverbs itself, is the choice we have to make between what is wise and what is foolish.

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I had hoped that she might have some comfort for us in part because Jesus' words today offer so little. He first shares with his disciples a rather difficult truth, forcing them to reckon with the cost of the good news he proclaimed. He reveals the depth of his identification with those seeking liberation: Christ's is a solidarity even unto death.

No sooner does Christ proclaim this news than his words turn to rebuke. The reality he asks his disciples to accept is met with resistance. Like Wisdom, he admonishes Peter for setting his mind on what is human rather than what is divine.

And then he turns his attention to the crowd, offering them a stark choice: between life *lost and saved* and life *saved and lost*.

He raises the stakes of discipleship: for the cost of following Christ is no less than one's very life.

And not only that: Jesus says the instrument by which we give up our lives is also the greatest symbol of the very power he resisted. The very threat against which his followers struggled to survive: the cross.

*"If any want to become my followers," he says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

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What an utterly foolish idea. You know, even after three decades of immersion and formation within the Christian tradition, after several years of study and now a few years of ministry, this claim still makes my head hurt.

This seems ridiculous enough for those who lived their lives under the shadow of the cross, under Roman occupation and the threat of political violence it represented.

But for those of us some 2,000 years removed from this context, living in a world where the cross itself has been reduced from an ominous symbol of repression to a jewelry staple, a trinket, how do we know where to begin?

For Christ the cross, it seems, is readily accessible to any of us. It's hard to ignore but easy to miss.

Yet what the cross asks of us is what Paul in 1 Corinthians openly calls foolishness: to seek gain through loss, power through weakness, and life through death.

On the heels of hearing Wisdom's cries and warnings, we are now asked to follow Christ on a fool's errand. To live a life worth living, he says, we must lose it—and I mean *lose it*.

At the heart of Christ's call to follow him, and of the gospel itself, is the choice we have to make between what is wise and what is foolish.

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*Where are the clowns?* I can almost hear him saying, or singing. *There ought to be clowns.*

For the cross on which Christ was crucified may have long since returned to the earth, but the foolishness of its message is ready for us to claim as our own.

So where are the clowns, those ready to join God in making foolish the wisdom of this world? Those ready to make holy disruptions of an unjust order? Those willing to bring low what the world sets up high? To embrace as strength what the world rejects as weakness? To be unashamed in their holy foolery?

For Christ *and us, his foolish followers*, the only life worth living is one given up in solidarity with those under the threat of the world's death-dealing.

For Christ *and us, his foolish followers*, the only world worth inhabiting is one turned upside down and inside out for the sake of justice.

We take up the foolishness of a Messiah executed. We take up the foolishness of a savior who embraced solidarity even unto death.

We die to *power over* one another to awaken to the extraordinary power found *with* one another.

In our life together, church, this might mean embracing a little chaos over order. It might mean privileging human messiness over the clarity of procedure. It might

mean carrying questions together instead of imposing answers on one another. It might mean cracking open our hearts in vulnerable connection rather than closing ourselves off.

It's a risky business, friends. It's a fool's errand. But it is the way of that Holy Loser we follow, that Holy Fool. And he and Wisdom—are they a pair?

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Scripture didn't give me the soft words I'd hoped for today, but I believe the choice it sets before us opens the possibility of a gentler world.

For in holy defiance of a world that too often demands our resistance, friends, may we foolishly embrace what is soft and tender.

In a world that too often demands of us an answer, may we humbly seek questions worth carrying together.

And in a world that normalizes violence, domination, and injustice, may we be foolish enough to choose another way to live.

Hope, too, is hard to ignore but easy to miss. But when I look at this band of holy fools, I know I am not alone. I know that, together, we can pick up our cross and follow Christ into a world foolish enough to try and bring heaven to earth.

So send in the clowns! Oh, wait. Don't bother, they're here.