

Wisdom and Fear- Matthew 2: 3-8 (January 20, 2019-3rd Sunday after Epiphany)

A couple of weeks ago I began this sermon series on the Magi and what they can teach us about wisdom by talking about awe as the beginning of wisdom. Awe humbles us; awe directs our wonder and appreciation outward, at something outside ourselves. I talked about how awe is so important to wisdom because wisdom is rooted in experience; wisdom is about being open to and gleaning the learning that life has to give us. Awe opens us up to life, awe gives us the humility and the sense of wonder we need in order to learn from life. This week I would like to explore what happens when we do not have that sense of awe about life, what happens when wisdom comes up against narrow self-interest? This week I would like to talk about wisdom and fear.

Let's begin with that most egregious example of wisdom denied and fear triumphant, the holocaust. If anyone epitomizes wisdom denied it is Herman Goering, Hitler's second in command. A documentary I recently watched claims the "final solution", as the Nazis called it was precipitated by a moment of wisdom denied, by the refusal of the Nazis to learn what life was teaching them. Before the gas chambers, soldiers had simply been lining up Jewish people by the hundreds, shooting them, and burying them in pits. But, they found this was taking a terrible toll on the shooters. The military started to notice deep psychological scarring in their soldiers; they noticed increased violence within those units that carried out the murders of Jewish civilians. In other words life was confronted them with the humanity of the Jewish people and the utter inhumanity of their actions. But such wisdom was a threat to the narrow self-interests of the Nazi government. Such wisdom was too much for them to bear, it led to the fearful and untenable conclusion that they were wrong. Instead, the Nazis reacted to their fear and decided to sanitize the murder of innocents and to remove their soldiers from the psychological scarring inherent in their actions. In July of 1941 Herman Goering, sent out a call for a plan "for carrying out the desired final solution to the Jewish question."¹

Wisdom asks us to stand in awe before life and learn from the experiences it brings us. Wisdom asks us to surrender control, because of this wisdom can provoke fear. King Herod was certainly frightened. The words of the wise ones informing him of a Jewish king about to be born in his midst sends him into a panic. Herod's neatly constructed world, based as it was on violence and oppression was suddenly under threat.

Wisdom provokes fear when we view the learning that life is giving us as a threat to the life we have constructed. Fear prevents us from seeing the possibilities that wisdom brings into our lives, from seeing wisdom as a doorway to something new. Fear is the enemy of wisdom because fear prevents us from seeing where God is calling and what God is doing in our lives and in our world.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann_Göring

In the face of tumultuous change driven by technology, by the migration of desperate peoples, by economic inequality it seems we have been hijacked by fear. Fear leads us to want to become insular, just look at Brexit and the call for a wall on the U.S./Mexico border. Fear leads to violence as we seek to defend what we fear losing, just look at the Quebec mosque shooting and the gun obsession in the United States. Fear leads us to ignore truth in favour of more comfortable narratives, just look at what happened with the sex education curriculum in Ontario and the treatment of climate science in the United States.

It's not that we shouldn't fear. Fear happens, it's a natural reaction to the insecurity that the call to change brings into our lives. The question for us as people of faith is, how do we deal with the inevitable fear that gets in the way of wisdom, fear that gets in the way of going where God is leading? In the face of fear we always have the choice of either reacting or responding. As people of faith we are called to respond to fear not react from fear. Faith gives us the assurance that God is working, God is present and our job is to let go of ego and control and surrender to grace. We do that by being compassionate with our human frailty, acknowledging the reactions that fear brings up in us but waiting on God to take us beyond those self-protective, barrier building, violence inducing reactions. Maybe that's what that line from that old hymn means that it was grace that taught my heart to fear.² Wisdom will bring fear but grace teaches how to deal with that fear.

Recently, I read about a group of mostly heterosexual Evangelical Christians in Alberta who are honestly and openly wrestling with on the one hand, everything they have been taught about how to read the bible and what it says about homosexuality and on the other, their lived experience of knowing faithful, loving LGBTQ people. They meet in secret and have a strict confidentiality agreement for fear of how their churches might react. They meet to try and make sense of their faith and their lived experience. They meet to support one another in their searching and in their fear. Confronted with wisdom these folks have chosen to let grace lead them beyond reaction to a loving response. Some of them still don't know what to think but they are willing to journey into the unknown together with others. Isn't that the story of the wise ones—following a mystery into the unknown, together?

Did you know that Herman Goering had a brother? His name was Albert and he was a bit of an embarrassment to Herman. Early on in the Nazi regime he was walking down the street in Berlin when he came across some well-dressed men and women scrubbing the sidewalk clean, and around them was another group of people watching. Upon finding out that the people on the ground were Jews who were ordered by the Nazis to do so as a public humiliation Albert Goering took off his jacket, went down on his knees, and began scrubbing. Albert Goering loathed all of Nazism's inhumanity and at the risk of his career, fortune and life, used his name and connections to save many Jews and

² Brene Brown, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/grace-and-fear>

gentiles. On one occasion - in the autumn of 1943 - he signed passports with his own hand for a Jewish family he had befriended.³

Albert Goering chose not to fear, he chose to surrender control and learn from life. Albert Goering was a wise man. Just like the wise ones, Albert Goering was also lead to a stable door there in Nazi Germany, God was found once again in the most unlikely of places. God was once disguised as a Jewish peasant, here was the divine disguised as Albert Goering's Jewish neighbours. Many missed it, Albert Goering did not, a deep respect and reverence, one could say an awe for life lead him there, wisdom lead him there. Wisdom leads us all there, to the place where God is being born, that place lies just beyond our fear.

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³ <http://www.goering.dk/index.htm>