

“Peace Had Its Change – What Now?”
Proverbs 1:20-33

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Wisdom is a popular trait to personify in literature and movies. These wise characters impart sage advice and offer fortuitous warnings of impending danger. They are guides, mentors, and the voices of reason. And, they most often appear as men. Yoda, Mr. Miyagi, Sherlock Holmes, Gandalf, Dumbledore, Atticus Finch, Captain Jean Luc Picard, Ron Swanson. All men. When I tried to think of women who were cast as the role of the wise one, I could only think of Mary Poppins. Even when these wise characters take the form of an animal, it is inevitably an owl with a surprisingly masculine voice.

In our holy scriptures, Wisdom takes a different form. In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman. What a breath of fresh air. Whenever people wonder why we evoke God with feminine language or use gender-inclusive pronouns, we point to this passage. Wisdom is a feminine aspect of God, part of the living spirit of God, whose purpose is to speak to us mortals. She is God in the form of a wise, prophetic woman.

Wisdom appears to God's people when we are in need of reminding who we are, where we come from, and what we are called to do. Wisdom is annoyed – no – fed up at humanity's refusal to live by the rules of love and justice that come from God. And so Wisdom arrives in the marketplace and the street corner, at the entrance of the city gate and in the town square, overflowing with anger and disappointment. Wisdom is not one to find a lone sinner in the quiet of their house and reprimand them. Wisdom is here for all of us – and she is going to make sure we hear her.

Wisdom's words are harsh. When I read them, they cut through my thick skin and penetrate my soul. She leaves me searching my actions and inactions – wondering if I measure

up under her sharp gaze – wondering if she can see the shortcuts I've taken, the moments of willful ignorance I've maintained, the damage I've surely done to other people and the planet.

Wisdom cries out, “I have called and you refused. I have stretched out my hand and no one heeded. You have ignored my counsel.” For me this is the speech every one of us has heard from a parent. “I told you what would happen if you did that but you did it anyways. And I'm not going to feel bad for you now!” Wisdom is the mother telling us, “One day you're going to make a mistake so bad that I'm not going to be able to fix it for you. All I'll be able to do is watch as you suffer the punishment of your own making.”

Wisdom's words are supposed to cut deep. They are supposed to make us cringe and wish she had something nicer to say to us. Wisdom speaks harshly because the stakes are high. She has come to speak to a world that oppresses the poor, idolizes violence, and has turned its back on God's love. Wisdom does not care if her words make us uncomfortable because she wants to move us from a comfort that comes from complicity to corruption to a discomfort at the suffering in the world around us. I imagine Wisdom would say that if we think her anger is out of line then we are not paying attention. In other words, Wisdom does not come offering words of peace, she comes seeking justice.

We talk a lot about peace – we sing about peace on earth and pray for peace between all nations and neighbors. We have symbols for peace and parades for peace. Peace is a popular idea but it also seems nebulous – even as we're praying for it, it feels so far out we wonder how we're ever going to achieve it. As we sing “let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me” we might as well add “because as soon as someone else joins me all peace will be lost.” Peace has become this idea that feels whimsical and far-fetched, and of course we want it, but how many of us actually believe in it anymore? How many times have we found ourselves nodding our heads in agreement when someone says it's inevitable that there will always be war somewhere? Or that

peace is a nice idea but we have to focus on reality.

Perhaps this is because the peace that we seek through our Christian faith cannot happen without justice. This is why we call ourselves a Just Peace congregation – we understand that justice is required before there can be peace. Too often we want to skip to the peace part – the part that makes us feel warm and fuzzy inside, without doing the hard work of justice that it takes to get there. Peace feels far-fetched because it is far-fetched without first achieving justice for all people and all of creation.

In her anger and disappointment, Wisdom has come to warn those of us who would rather seek peace than sit with the discomfort of an unjust world. She has come to warn us to be wary of those who seek peace before listening to difficult truths about the unjust systems our ancestors created and that we enforce daily. She has come to warn us against all who seek peace without first seeking a reality check on the state of our nation beyond our own privileged walls. Wisdom has come to say that those of us who are focused on peace need to pivot our prayers toward justice.

I'm weary of calls for peace. Colin Kaepernick demanded justice for black people and people of color, for bodies in the street and paid leave instead of sentences for murder. When other athletes joined him in his protest, NFL owners made calls for peace – to leave this divisive behavior behind so that we can join together in peace. We don't want peace, we want justice.

There are 3,000 families in Puerto Rico who are demanding justice for their loved ones who died because of Hurricane Maria and the lack of electricity, access to medical services or clean water. When our president got caught in a lie about the death toll he asked us to leave him in peace. We don't want peace, we want justice.

And speaking of clean water, the residents of Flint cry out for justice for their neighbors and children who continue to live without clean water and who are suffering the consequences,

sometimes deadly consequences, of contaminated water. Our state government would rather support their cronies than protect its residents – they would rather seek peace in retirement than do the work of holding people accountable now. We don't want peace, we want justice.

Peace cannot be separated from justice. Any time we start to feel comfortable – at peace with the world around us – the question we have to ask ourselves is who or what are we sacrificing in the name of our peace? We cannot settle for a peace that sacrifices justice for all people for the comfort of a few.

In the text from Proverbs Wisdom says, “They will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of God.” Fearing God is not about living in terror. It is about giving up control. And being singularly focused on peace is often about maintaining control over our lives, over other people's lives, and over our perception of the world. We claim peace when really we are asking to bury our head in the sand. We claim peace because we want everything to be calm, and quiet, and controlled to our liking.

Wisdom reminds us that we need to give up this control if we are going to live as God calls us to live. God calls us to commit our lives to justice, which is a lot harder, a lot messier, and a lot more work. We have to give up our own agendas of peace in order to work for God's agenda of justice. On this Just Peace Sunday we are called to proclaim that Justice must come before Peace, and that the work of our people – the work our faith calls us to – is to enact God's justice for all of creation. *Let there be justice on earth, and let it begin with me. Let there be justice on earth, the justice that is meant to be.*