**Mission Council Bible Study notes**

**Day 2**

Slide 1

* **Recap of yesterday**

Yesterday we looked at the powerful images of pathway and refuge in the Psalms. We saw how pathway is identified with God’s word in the laws and commandments, at how God is the one leading us on these paths, and that our conduct can be imagined as different pathways. And the destination of the righteous path leads to God’s presence, our rock and our refuge.

* **Introduce today**

Today we’re going to look at these images of pathway and refuge in the Wisdom literature – from Proverbs and from the book of Job, where we get two strikingly different presentations of how wisdom may be found.

Proverbs is another book that often gets short shrift in churches – it’s rarely included in the lectionary and therefore seldom makes its way into sermons!

The opening chapters of Proverbs teach through the lens of a son being taught by his parents to pursue wisdom. In this conversation, the son is encouraged to treasure the commandments of his parents, for they will guide him towards wisdom. They are teaching him the commandments of the law that is celebrated in Psalm 119. He must search for wisdom like silver so that he can understand the fear of the Lord, which is the knowledge of God. On your handout is a section from chapter 2.

**Prov 2.6-15**

For the Lord gives wisdom;

 from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;

 he is a shield to those who **walk** blamelessly,

guarding the **paths** of justice

 and preserving the **way** of his faithful ones.

Wisdom is something available to everyone if they search for it.

It’s not hidden, but it is precious and should be treasured.

Those who follow righteous paths of justice and integrity will find refuge in the form of protection from God along the way. Wisdom and justice are inseparable. So wisdom is something that humans search for, consciously choose, and strive for, yet it is also a gift from God. ‘Sound wisdom’ here is a rare word meaning something like resourcefulness. God’s gift of wisdom provides the ability and resources to handle any situation, and so it acts like a shield against the ups and downs of life.

The message is uncompromisingly positive about the rewards of refuge and protection for those who are on the right paths.

It continues…

Then you will understand righteousness and justice

 and equity, every good **path**;

for wisdom will come into your heart,

 and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

prudence will watch over you;

 and understanding will guard you.

It will save you from the **way** of evil,

 from those who speak perversely,

who forsake the **paths** of uprightness

 to walk in the **ways** of darkness,

who rejoice in doing evil

 and delight in the perverseness of evil;

those whose **paths** are crooked,

 and who are devious in their **ways**.

Just as Psalm 119 talked about the commandments being treasured in your heart so the parent teaches the child how wisdom will enter his heart or mind when he seeks God. In Hebrew, ‘heart’ usually designates the place of thought, your mind, and your will.

It is God’s wisdom here that is pictured as guarding and guiding. Wisdom will give you the ability to choose the right path, which is the path of salvation - light and guidance instead of darkness and crookedness. There’s an image that crops up frequently in the Hebrew Bible of crooked ways forming crooked people – our behaviour, our pathway, shapes our nature – where we choose to sit or stand or walk. Just like the Psalms we looked at yesterday, Proverbs paints black and white caricatures of the righteous and the wicked – of the good and wise path that leads to life, and the dark, twisted path that leads to death.

In the passage from James that we just heard, these themes of wisdom echo from the Hebrew Bible. James identifies two kinds of wisdom: wisdom that does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish, and the wisdom from above which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

So far, then, our biblical picture from the Psalms and Proverbs is a rosy one. We follow the commandments of God and things go well for us. We walk in the light, and we are blessed and protected. We fear the Lord, that is, we know our place before God, we worship him alone, and we are faithful to him.

**Slide 2**

But the reality of life and faith is not always so positive.

This is why lament psalms make up over a third of the whole book of Psalms. The psalmists cry out in distress, “Lead me to the rock that is higher than me; for you are my refuge!” (Ps 61)

And another, “For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy? Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let truth and light lead me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.” (Ps 43)

Sometimes our pathway looks like green lush fields, and other times like a barren desert.

Enter Job.

Job provides us with the reality check on Proverbs. If Proverbs is overly optimistic about the life of faith that is directed towards God, Job presents us with the anguish and horror of life when it feels like God is nowhere to be found, or, worse, that God is attacking you.

Let’s look at a section of Job’s lament and argument with his so-called friends: (read together)

**Job 23.8-17**

‘If I go forward, he is not there;

 or backward, I cannot perceive him;

on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;

 I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

Here Job plays with and parodies a psalm of trust, Psalm 139 –

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

 you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,

 and are acquainted with all my ways.

…

Where can I go from your spirit?

 Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

 and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,

 and the light around me become night’,

even the darkness is not dark to you;

 the night is as bright as the day,

 for darkness is as light to you.

Here the psalmist proclaims how close God is – how God is always there wherever he goes, and not even darkness can separate him from God’s reassuring presence.

For Job, he is searching and searching for God but cannot find him. On one hand he feels utterly abandoned by God, but on the other, throughout the book, he demands that God meets with him face to face, so that Job can complain against him and bring God to trial. On one level, Job understands his plight and suffering as a test by God.

But he knows the **way** that I take;

 when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.

My foot has held fast to **his** **steps**;

 I have kept **his way** and have not turned aside.

I have not **departed** from the commandment of his lips;

 I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.

But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?

 What he desires, that he does.

For he will complete what he appoints for me;

 and many such things are in his mind.

Therefore I am terrified at his presence;

 when I consider, I am in dread of him.

God has made my heart faint;

 the Almighty has terrified me;

If only I could vanish in darkness,

 and thick darkness would cover my face!

Job desperately declares his innocence in the psalmists’ language of pathway:

My foot has held fast to **his** **steps**;

 I have kept **his way** and have not turned aside.

I have not **departed** from the commandment of his lips;

Job has treasured up God’s commandments in his heart, so why is God standing aloof and not guarding and protecting him, as he has been promised?

 It’s a unique picture here in the Hebrew Bible that Job gives, of actually following in God’s own footsteps. It creates a beautiful image that becomes transported into the New Testament when the disciples are called to follow Jesus’ own footsteps, and to take up the path of the cross.

Yet for Job, he both desires and fears meeting God. His experience of grief and suffering has led him to be terrified both of God’s absence and of his presence.

And so how do we read this as Christians? What can we learn from Job’s pathway of suffering and lack of refuge?

Firstly, Job gives voice to the suffering of the innocent. He gives voice to those who need to cry out against injustice, to those who feel that God has abandoned them.

What is both fascinating and unsettling about the story of Job is that it questions everything about traditional wisdom teaching found elsewhere in the Bible. There is a poem that sits at the centre of the book of Job about wisdom. Rather than celebrating the gift of wisdom, it testifies to how clever humans are to seek out precious stones from deep in the earth, yet how impossible it is for anyone to know the way to wisdom. Only God knows the path to wisdom, and so fear of the Lord is the only sure starting-place to the journey.

Those who are looking for simple answers will be disappointed.

Those who think they can calculate how many blessings they should receive for their righteousness will be let down.

Those who think that God’s ways can be comprehended and judged by humans will find themselves both challenged and comforted by the very presence of God. For all the traditional wisdom spouted by Job’s friends, Job is not comforted. But God does respond to Job’s desire for a meeting with him. And it is only in God’s presence that Job finds peace from his wrestling and anger and suffering.

The tortured figure of Job has captivated the imaginations of artists through the ages.

This painting is from the C15th artist Carpaccio and it is called A Meditation on the Passion and Resurrection. For Christians, it is an invitation to imagine Job together with Christ. The third figure here is Saint Jerome, who wrote a commentary on the book of Job. Jerome is looking right at us, appealing to us to reflect on what he sees in Job.

Jerome sees Job as prefiguring Christ’s innocent suffering. Whether or not we would want to take on such a Christological interpretation of Job, inviting Christ and Job to sit together creates a different image of God’s presence alongside Job’s pain and suffering.

On the left of the painting as you can see, everything is barren and broken. There is death and darkness. The suffering Christ sits enthroned, not yet risen in glory, yet with the hope of resurrection hovering above his head with the symbol of a bird rising up in the air.

The red bird beside Christ, a symbol of sacrifice, placed in the field of life, of green, of peaceful animals.

The skull and bones next to Job symbolise death and suffering. Jerome understood Job to give a prophecy of resurrection in his declaration “I know that my redeemer lives” in chapter 19, the quotation inscribed on the stone underneath Job in the painting.

Even amidst such pain and suffering, Job is able to declare faith and trust in his redeemer, whom he would one day see with his own eyes.

Our comfort, our peace is that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. He has emptied himself and took on human form. He has known desolation, rejection and abandonment, so that we could always be united with him through his death and resurrection.

John’s Gospel picks up on the powerful images of pathway and refuge in the words of Jesus:

“I am the Way the Truth and the Life.” It is Jesus who leads us to the Father, by His Spirit, helping us to draw near. But the way is a narrow way and an uphill pathway. The radical command to “Take up your cross and follow me” is not offering a green and pleasant stroll through the fields of peace and plenty.

But it is Jesus’ light that both judges and saves. “I am the Light of the world.” By his light and by his example ahead of us, we can see the way we are to walk. But his light presents people with a choice – they can still choose to hide away from the exposing light, and continue to act in darkness.

Returning to the psalmists’ image of refuge as provision, Jesus is also the one who provides for his disciples: I am the Vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.The Christian pathway is an ongoing process of refuge-making and indwelling. Those who trust in the Lord find strength and refuge.

Jesus says “I am the bread of life” – the provision of refuge comes to us in his body and blood, uniting us with Christ.

And just as the pathways of God’s commandments lead to righteousness and integrity and refuge, so Jesus promises that those who keep his commandments will abide in his love.

The Psalms, Proverbs and the Gospel all share a sense of joy and delight in the commandments. In Psalm 119, the psalmist declares, “I delight in the way of your decrees.” I delight in your statutes. The word here is one of rejoicing. And in Proverbs, knowledge and wisdom will delight the soul – something that usually describes the human response to beauty. Jesus says to his disciples, I have said these things so that my joy may be complete in you, and that your joy may be complete.

And so let us pray that we find joy in walking the way together, even amidst pain, suffering and grief, assured of the God’s presence with us, knowing that nothing can separate us from his love, and that God is able to give a peace that passes all understanding, no matter how rough or barren the path may be.

Amen.