

## GOD AND THE VACCINES

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Grace Church in New York  
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*Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks. (Proverbs 1:20-21)*

The last time I stood in this pulpit and raised my voice was way back in July, a few weeks before I went on vacation. In Grace Church on that Sunday nobody wore masks. Nobody was terribly concerned about the delta variant, and we all assumed the coronavirus was a defeated foe. In Afghanistan the Taliban was still far from the capital city of Kabul, and the light of freedom flickered in the hopes of the war-weary population. In Milwaukee my mother was alive and kicking, and tuning in to our livestream broadcast of the service on the new laptop we had just bought for her. We were worried she wouldn't be able to figure it out, so later in the day I asked her if it worked. She proudly replied, "Not only did it work, but I worked it." In Flushing Meadow, Queens, the New York Mets were in first place, with a comfortable lead atop the National League East. Such was the world before I went on vacation. Remind me never again to go on vacation.

We live in a world gone awry, seemingly spinning out of control, and the question for people of faith has always been, "What does God have to do with it?" What saving help can we expect from God? A favorite story of preachers is one you've probably heard before – but not from me because I've never resorted to using it. Until today. Here goes. Despite dire warnings of torrential rain and flooding, a man refused to evacuate his home. "Save yourself and flee," said all of his friends and family. "No," said the man, "God will save me." Sure enough, the rains came and the floods chased the man onto the roof of his house. It so happened that a daring Boy Scout in a rowboat came by and cried out to the man, "Climb aboard and I'll save you." "No," said the man, "God will save me." As the water continue to rise a neighbor in a motorboat came by, but the man still refused the help. "God will save me," he shouted back. Finally the police sent a helicopter, dropped a rope ladder to the man and cried out, "Grab hold and we'll save you." "No," said the man, "God will save me."

Alas, the helicopter flew away, the flood waters swallowed up the man, and he drowned. At the gate of heaven he complained to St. Peter – who is usually at the gate of heaven in these stories. "I put my faith in God, and God didn't save me. Thanks for nothing," said the man. St. Peter replied, "I beg to differ. We sent you a rowboat, a motorboat, and a helicopter. What more do you want?"

*Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.* Today's Old Testament reading comes from the Book of Proverbs, a curious collection of sayings that has long puzzled Biblical scholars. Proverbs is one of three books in the Hebrew Scriptures that are called "wisdom literature," the other two being Job and Ecclesiastes. Wisdom literature generally tries to do two things. On the one hand, it wrestles with human suffering and searches for meaning to life in the midst of pain and anguish. On the other hand, it offers practical advice – almost common sense – to young people in particular in hopes of guiding them through life's many challenges. Wisdom literature seems to say, "Look, God has ordained the world to work in a certain way. If you follow these ways you will prosper. If you refuse to hear the voice of wisdom you will perish.

The voice of wisdom is feminine. Wisdom is a woman, often referred to as Lady Wisdom, or Dame Wisdom. Lady Wisdom cries out with the voice of God in the busiest places of the crowded cities. It is she who speaks in the reading today. At first her invitation is gracious but as time goes on her voice becomes increasingly strident. Reading the passage this week brought to my mind an

irreverent movie scene. The film is called *Moonstruck*, a 1987 classic starring Cher and Nicholas Cage. Apparently, Cher is trying to disentangle herself from a dysfunctional relationship with Cage when he professes that he loves her. What does she do? She slaps him. Then she slaps him again and says, “SNAP OUT OF IT!” So Lady Wisdom speaks, sometimes gently, and sometimes with a strident demand to snap out of our delusions and embrace what is obviously common sense.

One of the challenges of interpreting Biblical wisdom literature is that it lacks a context. It stands apart from the larger story of salvation history, by which God intervenes in the affairs of Israel at particular times. It is largely unconcerned with the Exodus and Exile, with the patriarchs and prophets, and with the chosen status of Jews. Since we don't know where Proverbs comes from or what situations it was meant to address, some say we should exercise great caution in applying its wisdom to our own dilemmas. Others say just the opposite. The lack of a context frees us to apply Proverbial wisdom at all times and in all places. Obviously, how and when to see life through the lens of Proverbs is a difficult question, but today I'm going to risk saying that perhaps it is not-so difficult. In fact, it may be obvious, even staring us in the face. It's hard for me to read the passage we've heard without connecting the dots to a particular point of controversy that roils our nation today. Of course, I'm referring to the vaccine debates between those who support various mandates and those who do not. I realize that I'm preaching to the choir here as we've made full vaccination a requirement to be in-person at Grace Church. But hear me out anyway.

To me, to millions of others, and probably to you it seems completely in line with godly common sense to receive the vaccine the instant you are eligible. Inoculation against a dread disease that has killed nearly 700,000 Americans strikes me as its own reward. Indeed, *Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice*. And what is she saying in this context – our context here and now? Roll up your sleeve and receive the gift of life as soon as you are eligible. If you have any hesitations, SNAP OUT OF IT. Do it to protect those you love if not for yourself.

Strangely, the message has met stubborn resistance, and the drive to increase vaccinations has stalled. Some say they are praying about it, waiting for God to tell them what to do. Some delay because they claim they are doing their research. Some declare that it's a matter of liberty and decline the vaccine because they don't appreciate being told what to do. Meanwhile the virus marches on, infecting largely the unvaccinated and morphing into new and ever-more dangerous variants that may put countless others at risk. So wisdom takes a beating in the public square, but that's nothing new. Lady Wisdom meets not only resistance but outright rejection in every generation. If you read on in today's passage from Proverbs you'll encounter the refusal of her hand stretched out to save, and the deaf ears turned to her voice warning against calamity. How does she take it? Not well. She even gloats over the fate of those who ought to know better, but choose to remain simple.

Likewise Jesus, in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (8:27-38), anticipates the rejection of his saving words and deeds: *Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed*. He asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Well, many theologians have set forth a convincing argument that connects Jesus and Lady Wisdom. Jesus is the incarnation of Wisdom. He is Wisdom in the flesh, in the streets and squares, at the busiest corners. He bids his disciples then and now to follow him – to hear his words and walk in the way of wisdom. Today's passage from Mark is dense and at times dark. But it does seem that in one place at least Jesus employs what could only be called common sense: *What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life? What can you give in return for your life?*

Forgive me if you think I am straying beyond the bounds of polite homiletical decorum, and delving into nasty matters best left on the street and public squares. I do so because we really do have a matter of life and death before us that needs to be addressed in-house. What is more, we have an obvious solution staring us in the face. Sadly, it is people who belong to a certain branch of Christianity, and people of other faiths who are dragging their heels. *How long, O simple ones, will*

*you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?* asks Lady Wisdom.

Earlier this week (9/7/21) *The New York Times* ran an opinion piece entitled, “*A Christian’s Case Against Exemptions to Vaccine Mandates*” The author’s point is that no Creed or Scripture exists within our faith that would prohibit Christians from being vaccinated, so no religious exemptions should be granted. They are bogus. It’s a good article, but I’d like to take it a step further. Not only does nothing in our faith prohibit vaccinations, much in our faith actually would encourage them. Yes, I’m preaching to the choir. But our calling is to take a positive appeal to the world, not to gloat over the calamity that will befall the foolish. God and common sense do not oppose each other. Faith and reason can meet together. Wisdom and worship can kiss each other.

So I ask again: What sort of saving help can we expect from God? How does God work to save us? Is it through magic and immaterial means? No. God saves us by moving the hearts of faithful people who are willing to be his hands and feet in the world. God saves us by putting to use the ordinary stuff of the earth: flesh and blood, bread and wine, bricks and mortar. God saves us by sending rowboats, motorboats, and helicopters. God saves us by raising up scientists who create vaccines. What more could we want?

In the church we speak of seven sacraments. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. The outward and visible signs all participate in the material order: water, bread, wine, the laying on of hands, for example. The outward signs are earthly substances, but also sure and certain means by which we receive the grace of God. When we speak of seven sacraments, however, we don’t mean to say that in all the vast times and spaces of the universe only seven sacraments exist. Rather, we mean to say that at least seven exist. Indeed, we live in a sacramental universe. The Psalm (19) that we recited today says it well: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.* If I had more time, I’d a book or an opinion piece myself to make a case for the sacramental nature of the vaccines. They declare the glory of God and show forth his handiwork. What more could we want? Are we missing the obvious?

Earlier this summer I saw a photo online that might add a touch of humor to the saving ways of God in the world. Let me add, parenthetically, that if I’d thought of it earlier I would have printed it in today’s bulletins. Alas, a verbal description will have to do.<sup>1</sup> A photographer named Eric J. Smith had traveled to the San Ignacio Lagoon in Baja to capture images of the abundant gray whales that are there. Once out on the water, not far away from Smith, was another small boat with what appears to be nine whale watchers aboard. All of them are facing the bow, some with their cameras trained at the ready. Others simply look bored out of their minds due to all the empty sea. The fact is they are all missing obvious.

What they failed to see was that a huge mother whale “emerged a foot behind the stern in a behavior called a *spy hop*. She slowly and silently stuck her head high above the water to look around.” The photograph that Smith was able to take is priceless. It’s almost as if the whale was pranking the whale watchers, who were waiting to see her, waiting for her arrival, yet looking in the wrong direction. Surprise, she says. I’m right behind you. What more do you want?

Likewise, *Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.*

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<sup>1</sup> The photo and article can be found at this link: [https://mymodernmet.com/viral-whale-watching-photo-eric-smith/?utm\\_source=join1440&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_placement=newsletter](https://mymodernmet.com/viral-whale-watching-photo-eric-smith/?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email&utm_placement=newsletter)