

First Presbyterian Church
Proverbs 11:1-8, “Wisdom and Security”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/20/2023

Story: last night – waking up anxious about my calf injury...

We live in a highly anxious and fearful time.

We hear about threats to our safety every day that stokes
our fears and anxieties.

When we get fearful, we want security.

And feeling secure is usually connected to money.

Think about job security – will artificial intelligence eliminate jobs for
large sectors of the economy? If so, what will those people do?

National security – our military expends around \$880 *billion* dollars
each year in order to ensure the United States remains
the most superior military power in the world.

(#2 in the world? China at ... 224 billion.)

Financial security – having enough invested so that we can
make it through unforeseen events,

live well in the twilight years of life and do the things
we want to do.

But Proverbs 11:4 makes a striking counterpoint to us:

“Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath.”

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath?

One line from the wisdom of Israel guts the pretense of wisdom
in these other pursuits of security through financial means.

At the same time... we shouldn't forget that Proverbs 10:22 says,

“The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.”

So we should not say that material resources
are to be shunned and that wealth is bad.

Without a doubt these blessings are a blessing from God.

But they are a blessing that is of limited value in and of themselves.

Here's the key: Our trust always has to be in the God who gives blessings,
not in the blessings that have already been given—

or in the anticipation of blessings
that we hope will come our way.

The Sage who delivers these Proverbs to us
would never have us live in fear of not having enough;
or to base our security in material blessings.

My great-uncle Leslie Mulzer lived a charmed life:
He knew Mr. Smuckers of Smuckers jam,
he fought in WWI in the infantry,
WWII in the Air Force as a bomber pilot,
and Korea as an Air Force officer.
He was offered a sum of money to be the first person to cross the Atlantic
with a female passenger after Charles Lindbergh had done it solo.
He put down a counter number, but the first offer was firm
and he decided against it.

When visiting him as a child he would drive us around Florida and tell us,
“That house is worth \$300,000, that car is worth \$50,000,
I know someone with an apartment in that building that costs...”

It seemed to me as a child that knowing these values made him more secure.
Yet his only son had a drug addiction and schizophrenia as a result.
Jimmy had to live in supervised living facility, and no matter
how much money he had or how many stories he told,
Uncle Leslie couldn't change that.

You can never have a genuine and enduring sense of *security* in life,
a sense that you are on solid ground
if you are always seeking to acquire more and more,
which *feeds* the anxiety that we don't have enough,
that we are not truly secure.

And so the sages of Israel, under the inspiration of God's Spirit,
teach us that the moral universe God has created works like this:
If we live with integrity, contentment, humility, and generosity,
our sense of security will not be undermined by our life choices.
We won't *regularly* be forced to discern the lesser of two evils.
When we live in a way that reflects the character of God,
that is the time we know genuine freedom and security.

We see this, for instance, in verse 5 in our passage,

**“The righteousness of the blameless
makes a straight way for them.”**

And in verse 3, **“The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.”**

Integrity means,

“Being of one piece, holding together, being consistent with yourself.”

Duplicity means, “Being divided within yourself.”

Integrity and righteousness

are things we observe in God and learn from God.

God is one. Undivided.

God’s character displays integrity to us,
so we are most secure when we reflect that integrity
in our own lives.

So how do we *do* this?

How do these Proverbs translate into our actual way of life?

When I try to imagine the life these Proverbs are urging us towards,
I keep coming down to a life that is aimed toward simplicity.

Not a life that is *simplistic* or reductionistic,

but a life that actively works against the desire to have more.

A life that chooses contentment and as a result

doesn’t get dragged into the race for security via consumption
that we see all around us.

Our local Quaker theologian Richard Foster wrote the modern classic
on spiritual disciplines, “Celebration of Discipline.”

He opens his chapter on simplicity with these brief sentences:

“Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage.

Simplicity brings joy and balance. Duplicity brings anxiety and fear.”

This is in keeping with the old Quaker song teaches us,

“ ‘Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free.

‘Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.”

To me those lines sum up the message of our passage.

The life of simplicity brings us freedom and joy and balance—
in other words, security!

The life of simplicity sets us down where we ought to be.

But the life that pursues security elsewhere
results in bondage, anxiety and fear.

There is security that goes deeper
than being able to buy (or fight!) our way out of a conflict.

There is security that goes deeper
than keeping our secret safe from anybody else's reach.

There is security that goes deeper
than being able to manipulate or intimidate
those around us to behave the way we want them to.

There is a deep and abiding security that comes from working well.
From being a person who is trustworthy.
From not taking advantage of a person
who is vulnerable.

From knowing that we are loved.
From having the life of Christ gradually grow inside of us
until it informs every arena of our life.

And so the Proverbs teach us that,

**“The righteous person is rescued from trouble,
and it comes on the wicked instead.” (REPEAT)**

So a question might come to your mind:

Are you saying that bad things don't happen to good people?

Are you saying that if I bet my life on God's way of living,

I will always succeed and be protected from difficulty?

No, I'm not. Bad things do happen to good people.

Honest business owners can get fleeced by dishonest ones.

Hard working people can get bulldozed by political interest groups.

Generous people can lose their savings
when the market crashes.

Righteous people die young.

Faithful people can be denied proper medical care.

Injustice does take place in this world and in this city.

So how can we believe the proverbs when they say something like

“the righteous person is rescued from trouble”?

Doesn't the presence of injustice in the lives of good people

prove that this Proverb is disconnected from real life?

I have two responses to that question:

1) Many times the righteous/wise really are rescued from trouble. It's *true*.

When we tend to our responsibilities as though we were working
for the Lord directly, we *are rescued* from the fate of those

who are lazy when they work,

because we provide a lot of value to the organizations
and communities we belong to.

When we are honest in our friendships and communications

we *are rescued* from the accusation of being untrustworthy or false.

When we dedicate time to meditation and prayer

we are rescued from the trouble of those who feel
far from God when facing life's challenges.

I could go on, but I hope you can see the self-evident truth

that wise living usually shields people and communities
from many bad outcomes.

Now we come to the more difficult side of the question.

2) When *injustice* comes into the life of the righteous person,
we will often not be rescued in that immediate situation.

Bad things do happen to good people.

To say that “if we just have faith, God will save you,”

is to say that all those people who have suffered simply didn't
have enough faith. It's really *their fault*.

I don't buy that for a minute.

We should not blame the victim for failing to properly prepare for

just this specific kind of calamity or disease or whatever they face.

So there is some tension here because good people who live wisely
do sometimes encounter genuine tragedy
that God does not save them from,
and we do see foolish people who get away with all their tom-foolery.
This is when we go to the Psalms where David says,
“Why do the wicked prosper?!?”

But even in these situations, we can trust that the wise will be
rescued from injustice in the ultimate sense.
At the end of all things,
God has guaranteed that all wrongdoing will be set right
and that restoration will be found in Christ.

So we trust by faith that injustice will not go unaddressed,
that innocent people who suffer will be vindicated.
But it may not be vindication that we see in our lifetime.

So where are we left after hearing this word from Proverbs?

I am helped when I realize that the same Spirit who inspired
the Sages of Israel was the same Spirit who inspired Jesus.
Which means that in a sense, we are sitting before Jesus
when we read these Proverbs.

And Jesus looks at you and all the places
where your fear, anxiety, worry weighs you down
in the search for security, and he says,
“You can set that down, now.”

Jesus invites you to come beside him and learn from him.
He invites you to imagine just one or two ways
that you could live more simply and therefore more securely.

Ask Jesus to help you take those small steps.
Over time, this security from God will build in your life,
and you will notice a lightening on your shoulders,
a new freedom in your decisions.

This is what life is like as those who rest secure in the Kingdom of God.