

SERMON TITLE: "Meditations on the Cross: The Power and Wisdom of God"  
SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: March 6, 2022, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Some of you came to the church on Wednesday to get your ashes. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, which, in the Christian tradition, is a season of repentance and spiritual preparation leading up to Easter. During this season of Lent, we remember Jesus' time in the wilderness when he was tempted and went without food for 40 days, and maybe we ourselves give up some food or habits in order to better focus our attention on Christ. We remember how diligently and selflessly Jesus ministered to the sick and the poor. We remember how Jesus drew the circle wide to include women, children, and those who were considered outcasts and sinners. We also recall how Jesus' teaching and acts of inclusivity were perceived as threats to those in power and how that conflict came to a head with Jesus' death on a cross.

If Jesus' story had ended with the cross, we probably wouldn't be Christians today. The story would have been too sad to hold human attention and devotion for 2000 years. Fortunately, the story of Christ went on to include Easter and Pentecost too. But at this time of the year, we aren't yet ready for the joys of Easter and the excitement of Pentecost. Before we get there, we need to do some careful soul searching. We need to recognize where we have fallen short and repent of the sins that get in between us and Jesus. We need to practice some spiritual disciplines to fortify our courage. And we need to spend some time considering Jesus' tremendous sacrifice. What did the cross mean for him? What has it meant for Christians through the ages? What does the cross mean for us today?

So, over these weeks leading up to Good Friday, we're going to look at the cross from different angles. If you have a cross at home that hangs on your wall, or a cross necklace that you wear, I invite you to spend some time during Lent contemplating that cross. Here in worship, we're going to use a

variety of scriptures to engage in some “Meditations on the Cross.” Today we begin this spiritual discipline with First Corinthians, chapter one. Let’s take a look at this text and see what the Apostle Paul means when he describes the cross as “the power and wisdom of God.”

### **1—THE POWER AND WISDOM OF GOD EXISTED BEFORE THE CROSS**

To understand the Apostle Paul’s argument here in 1 Corinthians 1, we need to first realize that the power and wisdom of God existed long before the cross. As Paul writes in chapter two, verse seven, he’s speaking about God’s wisdom which “God decreed before the ages.” So it behooves us to back up a bit and take a run at this topic of God’s power and wisdom.

You might have noticed that our call to worship this morning came from Proverbs 3. I chose that text because the entire Book of Proverbs is about God’s wisdom. It calls the reader to learn about God’s wisdom and instruction and find the power of salvation within God’s guidance and correction. For the young who need knowledge about God’s laws and for the mature who need more discernment, God’s wisdom is the source of life and salvation. The Book of Proverbs tells us that God’s wisdom was active from the beginning of creation, and God’s wisdom provides a refuge and strength to those who heed its advice.

This power and wisdom of God calls for a human response. For example, in the Old Testament, Psalm 107 recounts a long list of ways that God had helped the Hebrew people and redeemed them from trouble. In steadfast love, God had gathered them from slavery in distant lands, rescued them from hunger and thirst, brought them out of darkness and gloom, saved them from death, kept them from perishing during storms at sea, established them in towns with vineyards and cattle, and raised the needy from their distress. That psalm begins by calling the people to give thanks for all God’s wonderful acts of salvation, and then ends with this advice: “Let those who are wise give heed to these things.”

Likewise, in Psalm 111, we hear of God’s powerful works, which were faithful, just, and trustworthy. In grace and mercy, God had provided a means of redemption for the people. All that was

needed was a human response of praise and thanksgiving, a response of reverent understanding and obedient wisdom.

## **2—HUMAN RESPONSE TO GOD'S POWER AND WISDOM**

Of course, we know that human beings haven't always responded appropriately to the power and wisdom of God. For example, Psalm 53 gives this report: "God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. [But] they have all fallen away, they are all . . . perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one" (vv. 2-3). In 1 Corinthians 1:21, Paul sums up this human condition by saying that "the world did not know God through wisdom."

In fact, we humans have foolishly tried to substitute other kinds of so-called wisdom in place of God's wisdom. In various verses of 1 Corinthians, Paul calls this "human wisdom" or the "wisdom of this age." This is when we think we know better than God and want to do things our own way.

A few weeks ago in a sermon, I told you about a particular *Zits* comic strip. Well, this past week there has been another *Zits* storyline that caught my attention. Jeremy had a high school assignment that was due to be turned in on a certain day. He had his sociology paper all written, but—on some kind of rebellious teenage principle—Jeremy didn't want to submit his digital assignment until just before midnight. Jeremy's wise old dad kept urging him to get it sent in, but Jeremy waited until the very last minutes and was counting down. At four seconds before midnight, Jeremy finally hit "send" on his computer. But then the internet connection was slow, and Jeremy missed the deadline. Needless to say, his wise old dad didn't have much sympathy for Jeremy's failing. Jeremy would have to suffer the consequences of ignoring his father's wisdom.

## **3—THE POWER AND WISDOM OF GOD WERE REJECTED**

Since we all have made those kind of rebellious and foolish mistakes in school, at work, with our families, and in our spiritual life—it's good for us that God hasn't just given up on us and left us to our

own devices. Fortunately for us, God has provided another way for us to gain the divine power and wisdom that we have so often rejected. In a kind of reverse psychology, God used the scandal of Jesus' death on the cross to show us a better way. Of course, that horrific tragedy went against anything Jews would expect for their messianic savior. A king was supposed to be strong and victorious, not humiliated, tortured, and dead. And the Gentiles, with their Greek and Roman philosophers, would never have considered the criminal punishment of Jesus to come anywhere near their lofty thoughts and reasoning. And yet, says Paul, God was able to take that unjust, scandalous, and foolish execution of Jesus and turn it into the power and wisdom of God for salvation.

Paul himself related to the weakness and foolishness of the cross. Throughout his New Testament letters, the Apostle Paul readily admitted that he wasn't very eloquent. Paul came across pretty well in writing, but—in person—he wasn't very impressive. He alluded to a "thorn in his flesh," which we assume was some kind of health problem or physical impediment to his ministry. Paul was well-educated in Hebrew schools, but other people had more training in the Roman and Greek rhetorical methods that were valued around the Mediterranean region. Paul also worked with his hands for a living, making tents. He wasn't wealthy and didn't have status. Other speakers came across with more charisma, charm, and the appearance of power and wisdom.

But Paul was the spiritual leader and spiritual father of the Christians at Corinth, and he wanted them to understand. Their salvation wasn't going to come from human standards of wisdom or the power of noble birth. As he writes in verse 27, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world . . . so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

Counter-intuitive to what they would expect, God changed things up. Salvation wasn't going to come through human expectations of success or grandiosity. Instead, in a workaround, God's salvation and life would come through the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. The tragedy, the horror, the

undignified and wretched event of Jesus' crucifixion is what would catch people's attention and turn us away from our own ideas of righteousness. This unexpected twist in the plot of God's salvation is what would prove to be the power and wisdom of God.

### **CONCLUSION**

The old hymn "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy" calls us to give up the false pretense of our own ability to save ourselves. The hymn reminds us that we are "weak and wounded, sick and sore." We are "weary [and] heavy laden." Our human power and wisdom isn't sufficient today and never will be. The hymn urges that, instead of trying and failing to solve our problems on our own, we should "arise and go to Jesus," who is "full of pity, love, and power."\*

At first glance, there's nothing about the execution of Jesus like a criminal that seems powerful and wise. But, as our review of some Psalms indicated, we humans haven't been very good at responding to the wisdom of God. So maybe we can grasp salvation in this new way in which God uses the weakness and foolishness of the cross to bring about our redemption. Maybe, like Paul, we can relate to the suffering of Jesus and the horrible mistakes made by his betrayers and executioners. Maybe, in our own lowliness, we can connect, believe, and accept the cross as the power and wisdom of God for us.

\*Lyrics by Joseph Hart, 1759.