**Confirmation at Zion Lutheran Church**

**Wisdom**

**Background Information**

Five books of the Bible are traditionally labeled "wisdom literature:" Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. We looked at Psalms in a separate session so we will not explore it more in this session. This lesson will primarily focus on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, while briefly introducing Job and Song of Solomon.

The designation, "wisdom literature" is not meant to imply that the other books of the Bible are not wise, but rather indicate that the goal of these books is slightly different from other genres of biblical writing. Wisdom books aren't meant to teach us history or to relay prophetic observations or religious laws. Rather, wisdom literature is designed to help us think more deeply about what it means to be human and how we ought to live our lives.

**Job** is one long story about a *fictitious* character named Job, who was faithful to God and prosperous. One day, as the fictitious story goes, God and Satan are chatting, and God mentions that there is no one like Job for he is blameless and upright. Satan challenges God to let him attempt to take Job down and make him curse God and God allows the challenge. Satan imposes one horrible curse after another on Job and yet Job does not curse God. Job's "friends" come along and apply conventional wisdom to Job's state of misery – he must have done something for which he deserves the punishment. Job can't think of anything (and that is true) so his friends conclude that he harbors hidden sin against God and is being punished. After being faithful through all the misery that Satan could throw at him without cursing God, Job questions God. A dialogue between Job and God reminds him that he is but a mere mortal while God is God. The reward for his faithfulness is that God blesses Job richer than he was before.

The point of the book is to enter into the senseless suffering of others, and in the midst of it, learn to seek God. The book teaches that suffering is not the result of sin – suffering just happens. Prayer is the proper response to suffering. And it reminds us that God cares for and takes delight in God's creation.

**Proverbs** is perhaps the most easily recognized wisdom book because it contains many pithy sayings that mirror wise words we hear in our own families and cultures. While the book of Proverbs is a mixed bag (some of it is readily relevant, some is humorous, some of it dry and boring, some is confusing, and some we might no longer agree with), it contains several important truths about life as people of faith. Moreover, the very fact that this book of collected human wisdom is included in our Bible helps us to recognize that living faithfully is not only about how we interact with God but also about how we interact with others and how we make sense of our lives.

**Ecclesiastes** can be a challenging read. Sometimes it sounds like philosophy, recounting the ideas of someone who is experimenting with different life values (pleasure, profit, wisdom). Because of this, it can easily be misread as hopeless or even faithless. However, despite its frequently cynical tone and pessimistic outlook the book ultimately affirms faith in God and encourages trusting God so that we might live and enjoy life, even when we can't answer all of life's questions.

If we only read part of Ecclesiastes, it would be possible to come away with the sense that the writer thinks life is futile. However, a deeper read will argue that the writer should trust God and live in uncertainty.

**Song of Solomon** (aka Song of Songs) is a misunderstood book. It is often attributed to King Solomon (probably because of his love of women – many women), however, scholars think it was written between the third and fourth centuries BCE, six centuries after Solomon. The writer may have been a woman since the voice is often that of a female character. The book never mentions God or any religious practice. On the contrary, the book is about human beauty and the power of human physical love. Interpreters saw this book as symbolic of love between God and God's people. The claims about human love take deeper, fuller meanings when applied to God's love for us. Song of Solomon is best read at two levels, celebrating both human and divine love.

**About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)**

The LSB provides an introduction to each book at its beginning. Please turn to the following introductions and read the articles entitled “Background File,” “What’s the Story?” and “What’s the Message.” These articles can be found at the beginning of every book of the Bible and are very helpful in getting a basic understanding of each book’s content.

* Job – page 788
* Proverbs – page 1011
* Ecclesiastes – page 1061
* Song of Solomon - 1075

**What you need to know**

The word *wisdom* might be deceptive. You might be thinking *intelligence,* but wisdom literature in the Bible isn't about making us smarter. Wisdom is more about how we use the knowledge we have and how we handle what we don't know than how much we know. The inclusion of the wisdom books in the biblical canon indicates that living faithfully involves asking hard questions and living in uncertainty.

Wisdom literature looks to human experience to identify truths and, at the same time questions many assumed truths. In this way, the tone of these books can be cynical and questioning, as well as hopeful and insightful. While this might be confusing, it ultimately means that we are also a part of the process. Where do we see the truth? We often picture wise people as elderly (think of the iconic image of the sage), but young people can be wise as well, and not all old people are wise.

Wisdom is personified as a woman throughout these books. The use of the female pronoun isn't meant to be exclusive – it’s a function of translation and convention, not gender.

**Essay Questions**

*In your own words, answer all questions below in 100-150 words each and return them to Pastor Jesse by email at* *pastor@zionohio.org* *no later than next Sunday.*

1. Read Proverbs 31. Do you think this proverb is out of touch? How might you rework this proverb to reflect your experience?
2. Read Song of Solomon 7:1-13. This chapter is some of the most erotically graphic of the book, Song of Solomon, in fact, in the entire Bible. Can you see this passage as writing about the divine love between God and humankind?
3. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. The author seems to conclude that life is just a routine we must endure as if he is just a cog in the works of God's machine. How would you describe this passage?
4. Read Job 38-42. Give a summary of what is going on in these chapters.