

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 3

March 4, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

***Wisdom from folly, strength from weakness***

—1 Corinthians 1:22-25

In the 55<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of the Prophet Isaiah, the Lord says through his prophet, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9). Through Isaiah God tells us that he just doesn’t think the way we do. He looks at things completely differently—and in a better way—than we do. Human beings are earthbound and mortal; God is eternal and sees the big picture. The things that seem so important and powerful to man, are in the eyes of God—who has all power—insignificant. All the wisdom that the human race can spout with its ideas and philosophies is in the eyes of God foolishness. The measures that man uses to define strength, wisdom, success, are things that make God laugh because he knows how trivial they are. So if we want to gain wisdom, let’s learn it from the one who has all wisdom, and if we want to be powerful let’s gain power from the one who has all power. That’s exactly where God’s Word leads us today!

The Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Christians in Corinth, starts out this section in verse 18 by saying, “For the cross of Christ is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” That’s a pretty good summary statement that illustrates perfectly the difference between wisdom and folly, between strength and weakness. There are some pretty simple concepts in play here. God is hidden to human beings. It’s not like the good old days when Adam and Eve used to walk with the LORD God in the garden during the cool of the day. Our first parents sinned against God, they ran and hid from God, and now God is hidden from human beings. We can still see evidence of God in the beauty and majesty of creation and the complexity of life, and we can see evidence of his power and his love all around us, but we cannot know him in nature or in the cosmos. He’s hidden. Over the last 6,000 years or so of human history since mankind plunged itself into sin and reaped the consequence of death, human beings have invented all kinds of ways to try to uncover God, to learn who he is, to patch up the broken relationship with God, to fix the sin in the world, to live in harmony with our fellow man, with nature, and with God and to defeat death. Human philosophers have come and gone over the centuries. Some have invented their own gods and founded new religions. All of them rely upon human wisdom and human strength. And all of them fail. God remains hidden. So man calls God dead and declares himself to be his own god. Or science is god. Or the government is god. But nothing improves. Peace remains elusive. Violence and wickedness increase on the earth. Man passes new laws to curb evil, and man’s lawlessness increases. Man discovers new technologies to make life better, and all they do is increase man’s inhumanity to man with new ways to kill and maim and destroy and enslave and pervert and debauch. But man keeps trusting his own wisdom and his own strength, and he keeps reaping the whirlwind of death.

Human solutions fail, because as clever as man might become and as wise and powerful as human beings might declare ourselves to be, we are still earthbound and mortal. In ancient Babel human beings tried to build a tower to reach God in the heavens. Today human beings launch rockets into space hoping to discover the wonders of the cosmos, and that’s cool stuff! But we cannot find God or reach God by our own wisdom or strength.

Here’s the problem—it’s really simple—here is the measure of human wisdom: You can be at the top of your career, at the pinnacle of worldly achievement, but inside your head are little blood vessels called capillaries that are about the thickness of a human hair. Through those tiny blood vessels flows the blood that feeds your brain and keeps you alive. If at any moment one of those tiny blood vessels bursts and you have an aneurism, your brilliant brain will stop working, and you can be dead within minutes. At any second, all your wisdom and your life itself are literally hanging by a thread. This is the measure of human strength: You can be as physically fit as can be; you can run and exercise and lift weights and do cardio and eat healthy and get plenty of sleep. But if a blood clot the size of a pinhead starts to move through your system and it gets stuck in your lung or your heart or your brain, it could very easily mean the end of your life. This is the measure of human strength: You can be as healthy as a horse, young, strong, hale and fit, in the peak of conditioning. But a common influenza virus so small that it cannot even be seen with the most powerful optical microscope can completely flatten you for three days, you might need a week after that to fully recover, and it may even take your life. Here is the measure of human strength: In the midst of life we are in death. When we back the car out of the driveway we have no way of knowing whether we will return home. When we enter an intersection we may not make it through. When we take off in a plane we may not land. When we go to sleep at night we may not wake up in the morning. Our life is a

mist. We are here, and we are gone. When we understand our mortal chains, our folly and our weakness, then we realize why we can never build a path to God. For God and man to be together, God must stoop down and come to us.

*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.* It is impossible and ludicrous for us to think that we can have God on our terms, but that's human arrogance at its worst. In our Gospel today we heard the response of the Jews after Jesus cleansed the temple. "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" This was a recurring theme with the Jews. They wanted Jesus to *force* them to believe that he was the Messiah. "Give us a sign! Perform a miracle for us!" they demanded of him again and again throughout his ministry. It didn't matter that Jesus cleansed lepers, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk and even raised the dead. "Give us a sign!" they howled. Jesus said, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth." In today's Gospel he said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." He promised to rise from the dead. That was the ultimate sign that he was the Son of God. They would get their sign, but it wasn't what they expected. The Greeks were the same way in wanting God on their terms. They had their philosophers and their schools and the Socratic methods. They loved to bat around the latest new ideas and philosophical fads. They loved cleverness and sophistication.

To Jews and Greeks, Jesus and his apostles had one message: "*We preach Christ crucified!*" The message is a "*stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" There is nothing that appears powerful about Christ crucified, yet in the cross of Christ God reveals all his strength and all his wisdom as he does what only God can do. Man cannot reach up to God, so God reaches down to man. The Son of God leaves his eternal glory and eternal crown and stoops down to reach out and save the lost and fallen human race. He enters a world that is blinded by sin, infatuated with all the wrong things, drowning in folly, captive to Satan and enslaved to death. God becomes a man. He wraps himself in human flesh, and the eternal God, who is limitless in his power, infinite in his wisdom, becomes bounded by space and time, subject to the natural laws that he himself created and to the moral and ceremonial laws that he himself ordained. God himself becomes earthbound and mortal and weak. In order to save the very people who mocked and scorned him, the King of the Jews and the King of the Universe allowed himself to be stripped and nailed to a cross. As the ultimate test of his strength he carries the weight of the world's sins, and the God who is immortal dies. But in his death, in Christ crucified, do you see what happens? In that horrible shame and that abject humility, Jesus bares his mighty arm of strength and wins the ultimate victory. By his sacrifice he makes atonement for sin, by his blood he washes away the world's guilt, and by his death he destroys death itself.

What seems like folly to the world is wisdom to those who are being saved. What seems like nonsense to those who are perishing is to God's chosen people the most precious and cherished truth. Because of Christ crucified your sins are forgiven. Because of Christ crucified your debt of sin is paid in full. Because of Christ crucified God has opened for you and me the way into heaven, given us the gift of eternal life, and we can run into the arms of God our loving Father. All because of Christ crucified.

Now as God's chosen and dearly loved people, God not only reveals his wisdom and strength in Christ crucified. He gives us his wisdom and strength. He fills us with his Spirit and lives in our hearts. "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). The Commandments that we heard in our first lesson are now our joy and delight. We love God's law and want to keep God's law, for this honors God and gives glory to Christ. Human wisdom says, "Put yourself first, look out for your own interests," but God's wisdom says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." Human wisdom says, "Don't let anyone take advantage of you, get what is owed you," but God's wisdom says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Human greatness is defined by money, power, success, prestige, image, accolades, advancement. Wisdom from above teaches us that being great means becoming like a little child, serving in humility, imitating Jesus in his sacrificial love for others. We can do that because no matter what the world offers us it cannot hold a candle to the status that God has already given to us as his dear children, heirs of eternal life. We can do that because no matter what we miss out on in this world or what the world might take away from us for being disciples of Jesus, we will not miss out on eternity with our victorious King. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." So we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

The way God thinks is not the way we human beings naturally think, and God's strength is not found in the things man considers strong. *The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger*

*than man's strength.* God has brought you from folly to wisdom. He has taken you from human weakness and given you divine power. Praise God that he has given us wisdom and power in Christ! Amen.