

## WISDOM AND WOE

Isaiah 40:1-8, 27-31; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
 A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham  
 The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York  
 August 25, 2019

One of the most compelling theological books of the last two centuries, at least in my opinion, was written not by a Biblical scholar or an academic theologian, but by a novelist. It was Herman Melville's classic tale of obsession, *Moby Dick*, which, like most of Melville's fiction, had deeply religious themes running throughout.

A few weeks ago, in the midst of the disheartening news of the day, I began thinking about one particular line from that book, and it has been stuck in my mind ever since – a line I memorized the first time I read the book as an undergraduate English major fifty years ago. The words are spoken by Melville's sailor-narrator, Ishmael, in the closing paragraph of the 96th chapter, called "The Try-Works."

But first, an aside about whaling ships. "The American whaleship [was] outfitted with a brick fireplace or furnace built on its deck between the foremast and mainmast. Within the brickwork [were] situated two very large kettles.... This construct [was] called the try-works, because the operation it [performed was] called trying-out the whale's blubber, which [amounted] to boiling the oil out of it."<sup>1</sup>

Anyway, in the story Ishmael recalls a night on the deck of the *Pequod*, when he virtually fell asleep while standing at the ship's helm. He had drifted into a trance while thinking of the woeful lot of the ship – its captain, its crew, and its cargo. In a hallucinatory moment Ishmael is overcome by what he calls the "blackness of the darkness," as he stares at the red glow and black smoke of burning whale blubber in the try-works.

In his trance Ishmael is overwhelmed by his dismal surroundings and loses track of where he is or what he is doing. He turns his back to the tiller and compass and begins to stare mindlessly astern, almost overcome by the gloom. Then, just as the ship is about to fly up into the wind and capsize, Ishmael comes out of his trance, correcting the ship's course in the nick of time. Admonishing himself to stay alert and to keep his face to the compass, he begins to recite words from Solomon in the Book of Proverbs: "the one that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain (even while living) in the land of the dead." Then he speaks the line I remember still from 50 years ago... words perhaps difficult to grasp on first hearing, but which offer a telling and eloquent commentary on the human condition. He says, "*There is a wisdom that is woe, but there is a woe that is madness.*"<sup>2</sup> With some help from the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Paul, I want to try to unpack something of the meaning of that instructive line: "There is a wisdom that is woe, but there is a woe that is madness."

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.melville.org/diCurcio/96.htm>, accessed July 30, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, New York, Norton Critical Edition, 1986, 355.

*There is a wisdom that is woe.* At heart, what Ishmael suggests is that there is no wisdom in naïve innocence, in mindless optimism, in closing our eyes to the terrible reality of the world around us. Rather, the beginning of wisdom and, I would add, the beginning of faithfulness, lies in the recognition of the world's deep sorrow and woe. There is a wisdom that shares in the world's grieving. Says Ishmael, there is a wisdom that is woe.

There is a wisdom that recognizes that terrible, frightful things happen to people every hour of every day, a wisdom that does not offer glib answers or parade a blind piety before such pain. There is a wisdom that penetrates the superficial harmony of a community to reveal the underlying tensions and strains. There is a wisdom that sees behind illusions of harmony to the anger and resentment and divisions that separate people one from another.

There is a wisdom that looks beyond simplistic solutions to the awful complexities of human suffering. A wisdom that is unsurprised by acts of callous human cruelty the *New York Times* describes for us every day, knowing, as wisdom does, the depth of human brokenness and cruelty. There is a wisdom that recognizes woe – that does not shrink from it or dismiss it or deny it but, to the contrary, chooses to stand in the midst of it and affirm it.

*There is a wisdom that is woe.*

Ultimately, one of the marks of personal maturity is the awareness that there is a world larger than our own individual lives. It is a lesson we try to impart to our children, to help them flourish and to make them better global citizens. In the same way, one mark of Christian maturity is the recognition that the inhabitants of the world around us are our neighbors, that they, no less than we, have sorrows and woes, and that we are invited by Jesus himself to love them, to care for them, to share with them not only their great joys, but also the depths of their anguish.

When we say that in Jesus Christ the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we are affirming in part that God's wisdom knew human woe through the suffering of Jesus on the cross, that in Christ God thus drew us into God's care. One of my teachers, Henri Nouwen, once said that Christian compassion "asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish.... [It] requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."<sup>3</sup> When we minister as the body of Christ, we are called to seek out persons in places of suffering and sadness, and in Christ's name, to gather them into our care. Not to deny their grief or dismiss their fears, not to suggest easy answers, not to defend God's actions, but simply to be there to embrace them with open arms of love and compassion, to share in their pain. As one who has known such love and care from the faith community, I know how much it means. I know others in this room today know it, too.

There is a wisdom that is woe. Indeed.

---

<sup>3</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/compassion/>, accessed August 14, 2019.

But the recognition of woe cannot be the last word. We grieve, says Paul, but not as those who have no hope. Melville doesn't let Ishmael linger at this point either. He says, "There is a wisdom that is woe, *but* [he quickly adds] *there is a woe that is madness.*"

When we go so far as to share in another's pain and identify with the world's woe, we will come face to face quickly with enormous distress, and there can follow a keen temptation to despair, to become lost in our grief or disillusionment and overcome by the deep blackness of the world's darkness. It is possible in such moments to see only the woe, and no light at all. Pessimism may grip us.

We want to respond to need with help, but we feel helpless. A voice says, "Cry!" and we say, "What shall we cry? All flesh is grass!" It is hopeless, we say. There's no use. In such moments we risk crossing the line between wisdom and madness. John Carey writes:

The mature person perceives the world's madness... But [such madness] does not negate the realities of growth, of grace, kindness, love, healing. The wisdom that sees the [depth of human suffering and woe] becomes madness when it turns to cynicism and a loss of hope for the human future. Responsible people do not let the ubiquity of madness keep them from finding and identifying with...communities which are agents of reconciliation [and hope].... To be responsible amid the world's capriciousness means to...continue to press on for the [wisdom and the] love that lie beyond the woe.<sup>4</sup>

Anchoring such responsibility is the certainty of God's promises. "We grieve," said the apostle Paul, "but not as those who have no hope." The prophet Isaiah stands on the brink of madness as he tries to reject God's call, as he treads the border of hopelessness and despair. But God's own retort to Isaiah reaffirms God's power and presence in life, and sets the prophet back on course: *Yes, the grass withers...yes, the flower fades... but the word of our God will stand forever!*

There is a permanence of strength available to those who seek to be agents of God's hope and help in the world, those who do not avoid, but actively engage the world's great woe. Says Isaiah, "They who wait [in hope] for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." Part of what sustains us is the promise that the woe we are experiencing is never the final word, that the last word is always grace. That promise can enable us to take the worst the world has to offer and still find reason for living.

A number of years ago, *Life* magazine asked fifty-some people to answer the rather imposing question, "Why are we here?" The respondents included theologians, scientists, authors, celebrities, and an assortment of ordinary people. One of them was an eleven-year-old cancer patient named Jason Gaes. With a wisdom that claimed the woe, yet still found hope, young Jason said:

Why are we born is really a hard [question to answer]. I think God made us each born for a different reason. If God gives you a great voice maybe he wants you to sing. Or else if God makes you seven feet tall maybe he wants you to play for the Lakers or the Celtics.

---

<sup>4</sup> John J. Carey, "Carlyle Marney as Ethicist," *Theology Today*, July 1980, 179.

When my friend Kim died from her cancer, I asked my mom, if God was going to make Kim die when she was only six, why did he make her born at all. But my mom said that even though she was only six she changed people's lives. What that means is like her brother and sister [might] grow up to be the scientists who discover the cure for cancer, and they decided to do that because of Kim. And like me, too. I used to wonder, why did God pick on me and give me cancer. Maybe it was because he wanted me to be a doctor who takes care of kids with cancer, so that when they say, "Dr. Jason, I get so scared," or "You don't know how weird it is to be the only bald kid in your whole school," I can say, "Oh, yes I do. I had cancer and look at all my hair now."<sup>5</sup>

Wisdom, like Jason's, claims the woe. It grieves, but not without hope, for it mounts up with wings like eagles, rising out of the blackness of the darkness. Interestingly, Melville's Ishmael speaks of such a possibility, too, in words that sound much like the words of the prophet:

There is a wisdom that is woe [he says], but there is a woe that is madness. And there's a Catskill eagle in some souls that can... dive down into the darkest gorges and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he flies forever in the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than the other birds of the plain, even though they soar.<sup>6</sup>

Friends, the good news of the Gospel is that the Christ gave us wings and taught us how to soar, even as he taught us by his own life to swoop down into the deepest gorges of human misery and woe. His victory over death assured us once and for all that not even the "blackness of the darkness" can deter our flight.

There is a wisdom that is woe, but there is a woe that is madness.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

---

<sup>5</sup> As cited in *Life* magazine, December 1988. Gaes went on to write a book for children with cancer and lived cancer free for a number of years before a brain tumor claimed his life last year at the age of 40. His obituary is here: <https://www.newcomerkentuckiana.com/Obituary/159783/Jason-Gaes/Louisville-Kentucky>.

<sup>6</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 355.