



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Forgotten Wisdom”

Wisdom Sermon Series Part II

Hosea 4:1-6, Luke 16:19-31

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Larry the Cable Guy. Boy, he can make me laugh, like when he said, “[My grandma got a camouflage Bible... now we can't find it. I don't care who you are, that there is funny.](#)”

It *is* funny. But whether Larry the Cable Guy meant to be or not, he was not only funny, he was insightful. As Hosea and Jesus will point out, God's people have a knack for so camouflaging the Bible that they can't find it.

Hosea 4:1-6:

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel,
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty
and no knowledge of God in the land.

² Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

³ Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.

⁴ Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,



for with you is my contention, O priest.
⁵You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night,
and I will destroy your mother.
⁶My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge!
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me;
and since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

He is *102 years old*; 102 years old and Nathan Goff speaks with clarity, insight and a strong voice on the first of the *Lenten Video Series*. Every week during Lent, we’ll release a video where an older member of our congregation shares stories and reflections. The video series will complement our *sermon series*. While the sermon series focuses on ancient texts the video series focuses on years of experience. That is the wisdom of faith after all, the interaction of ancient texts with lived experiences.

As Elizabeth said in her sermon last week, the Bible is all about one generation passing on its best wisdom to the next generation. Teach it, repeat it, study it, pray it, remind yourself of it when you go to bed at night and when you wake up *live it*—and maybe you’ll be spared some harm and be helped to flourish as human beings and as a community. Still, the Bible knows that wisdom truly becomes ours when it is forged in our own experience. Our experience can validate what has been passed on and reveal how old wisdom needs to evolve.

I love how the movie *Forrest Gump* plays with this. Forrest quotes what his momma passed on to him: “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re going to get.” Forrest knows this is wise because his trusted momma said that it was true *and because he experienced it*.



- When he was wearing leg braces, he didn't know he would become an outstanding runner.
- He didn't know that running fast would get him a college degree and running long would get him through a long season of grief.
- He didn't know where loving Jenny would lead him;
 - not to their spending a life together,
 - but spending the rest of his life with a son he loved just as much—only in a different way.

Forrest learned that wisdom is contextual and has to evolve. His momma saying, “[You're the same as everybody else](#),” was true in regard to his dignity and worthiness as a human being,

- but in certain areas he had real gifts—
- and in other areas, he had deficiencies.

So, he also had to also remember his momma telling him, “[You have to do the best with what God gave you](#).”

You can find *Forrest Gump* on Amazon Prime, but let's go back to what you can find on our YouTube channel. Nathan Goff is one of the few surviving members of a generation that had a childhood in the Great Depression, who served in the Second World War as young adults and then worked hard to make a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Nathan learned what was passed down to him in the homes he lived in, at church, and through what others taught him, but you can tell from the video that everything he trusts has been borne out by experience.

I'll give this much of his video away to illustrate. Nathan's family was hit so hard by the depression, he was sent to live with other family members. For years, Nathan thought he did something wrong to make his parents not want him anymore. He learned later from his sister that it was actually because his parents could not afford to feed two children, and so they did what they did to give Nathan a shot at a better life. Home and Church passed on to Nathan to do what he could to provide for himself and his family, and to help others when he could. But Nathan lived that wisdom because he was determined never again to feel ashamed for being poor, and help others avoid that shame as well, even with the shame being unwarranted. As a result, he was frugal in his spending and generous in his giving.

It is often said that we need to learn from members of Nathan's generation before we lose them. But, the video lasts half an hour. *Who has the time?*

That is the question of our culture, which has made an amazing pivot. Broadly speaking, we live in a day and age when the wisdom of the young is often privileged over the old. Andy Root talks about this a lot. I so value what Andy has to offer that I not only invited him to be our next Edmunds Lecturer but also invited ministers from around the country to come spend two days of the Edmunds Lectures in conversation with him. I'm not the only one who is interested in what he has to say because every one of the 18 ministers invited said “Yes,” and did so within a week of being asked. Andy teaches as a theologian who studies sociology and he does a good job



explaining how it has come to be that much of our culture prioritizes *Now and New* over *Then and Old*.

One reason, Root says, is that time moves a lot faster now—
not measurable tick tock time,
but time as we experience it.

And, who are those who are best able to keep up with the rapid changes?
The young.

What does he mean when he says time moves faster?

During our Annual Meeting, some of you will pull out smartphones, scan the QR code in your bulletin, and instantly pull up the Annual Report. That's one new change—a phone being used for reading.

But is your smartphone *smart enough*? If one is using an iPhone and it has a number beside it that is less than 12, then it is a phone Apple no longer supports except to offer security updates. The now out-of-date iPhone 11 is too old, outdated. It *came out in 2019*.

Millie and I just got a new boiler. Our old boiler was 60 years old. Our new one? The installer said we should be happy if it works for 20 years. That can't be right, so I googled it. Yep, he's right.

Time speeding up is not just about technology. Look how fast fashion changes. Look how fast *politically correct* and *culturally cool* expressions change. I know this by experience—my middle daughter is constantly correcting how I say things. Look how fast you can write a paper or do research using artificial intelligence. For this sermon, I asked ChatGPT to write a four-page summary of the French Revolution. In seconds, a really good summary was given to me.

Who can keep up? Maybe no one, but the young are better at it than this 65-year-old, I can tell you that (I thank God for the younger people I work with on staff).

But there is a problem when “Now Wisdom” easily dismisses old wisdom. I see it happening in our culture, in our nation, in the larger church. I attended a meeting to talk about the possibility of an educational event that was going to be about the future of the church. A church pastor who is a couple of years older than me, a pastor with a Ph.D. in theology, a man for whom I have enormous respect, said something in that meeting that won a lot of approving nods. He said, “[Let's not put any of us older ministers on the planning team. Let the future of the church plan its future.](#)”

There is a nice ring to what he said, and it looked like everyone else in the meeting was happy with his saying, reflecting that they agreed that the young, who have more to say about “Now,” might also have more to say about the future. I mean, there's some truth to that. Don't ask me how to best use social media in the church of the future, go to Andrea Boone with that question. But I was shocked to hear how a minister who has years of experience serving the church—a scholar who has spent his career studying ancient texts—would be the one to suggest that *only* younger voices having anything worthwhile to say about the future of the church.

But, before those of us who are older get our feathers too ruffled at what he said, we need to remember that many who are older have what I would call “Wisdom Amnesia.” It would be great



if the world were interested in old wisdom, if only those who knew it didn't act like they had forgotten it.

When the prophet Hosea voices the critique of our passage, he is speaking primarily to established priests who speak to, but also represent, those who had status and wealth. His critique came out of a deeply conservative place. He wanted to conserve what hard experience had taught the people of Israel. He wanted to conserve the oral tradition that came of it—a tradition that serves justice and shows compassion. He is upset by the evidence of Wisdom Amnesia. You heard his list—lying, murder, stealing, adultery being acceptable. Have his people forgotten the basic moral truths that Israel learned from being rescued from slavery and then becoming a people who survived and then thrived by serving the common good and not forgetting the least of these?

Hosea then speaks to something else that the people have forgotten. There are consequences in life.

- Neglecting health leads to sickness,
- dishonesty erodes trust,
- and forgetting old wisdom invites new chaos and suffering.

Jesus uses consequences to make the same point as Hosea. He does it in a different way by telling a parable that has a setting in places of lasting reward and lasting punishment. Basically, he talks about justice and compassion with an eternal perspective.

A rich man is flabbergasted to find himself in Hades. The one who showed no compassion to Lazarus whose poverty and suffering was obvious now begs for relief from his own suffering—even asking that the one he abused be his angel. When he is refused that relief, he begs that his family be warned. And look at what he is told: “**They have the Law and the prophets. The old wisdom hasn't gone anywhere.**”

Jesus uses his stark parable about eternity to make a point about life right now—his now, and our now. He reminds us that in any life-giving, community-enhancing, moral tradition there is a conservative streak. We need to conserve the moral tradition that has brought us this far, the tradition that demands justice and compassion. No matter how fast things change, no matter what popular influencers are telling us should be acceptable, it is dangerous to ignore old wisdom about how to live in a way that is responsible and compassionate.

Later in the sermon series, you're going to hear about the Progressive streak that has to be in any healthy wisdom tradition. Wisdom adapts as the world changes—and, I guess, as time speeds up. That is to come, but today (and in many Sunday sermons) I want to remind us that most of the best wisdom for how to live good and faithful lives has already been figured out, if we will only remember it.

I'll close from moving away from the critical mood of our passages to the affirming word of how old wisdom can help us thrive as human beings. I want to speak of someone who is frequently dismissed these days by people today for being so “*Not Now*,” for committing the modern sins of being dead, being white, and being male.



John Calvin published a little book that is really an exert from his massive *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹ This little book is titled *The Golden Book of the True Christian Life*—sometimes shortened to *The Christian Life*. It was a bestseller in his day, read by ordinary believers because of its old and practical wisdom that spoke directly to their lives.

His little book illustrates how the wisdom of the best of what is now called the Greatest Generation didn't just emerge from their lived experience but was also passed down to them through the church. Here is the old wisdom Calvin would urge us now to forget.

- Live not for yourselves, but for God, allowing God's love to shape your thoughts and actions.
- Bear trials with patience trusting in God because our true home is with Christ.
- Be beware of what comes of pride and self-glorification and be humble—don't blame the weak when being weak is beyond their control.
- Treat others with kindness, generosity and a spirit of forgiveness.
- And, live with an eternal perspective. When in need, accept help, and when able, share from your abundance to help others.

Wow! One of our tradition's great theologians who writes so simply, clearly and practically. For Calvin, this wisdom was grounded in his belief in the God of Jesus Christ. But I don't care who you are or how fast things change. That there is wisdom.

¹ Chapters 6-10 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

