

February 1, 2026—The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Rev. James Wyatt

The Wisdom of God

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” I said in Bible study on Tuesday that our reading from 1 Corinthians this morning is one of my favorite passages of Scripture, which got me thinking about why that is. I think partly it’s because when I was in seminary I spent a good while developing a sermon for a preaching class that relied pretty heavily on these verses. But it’s more than that. The reality is, “the message about the cross,” as Paul puts it is central to everything I believe and understand about God and about how God calls us to live in the world.

I’ve said before, in relation to the parables of Jesus, that I always try to remind myself, if I’m not at least a little bit outraged I’m probably missing the point. That’s true of the parables, it’s true of the Beatitudes we heard today, and it’s all the more true of the cross. It’s easy for us, I think, to forget how scandalous the cross is, and especially how scandalous it was in its original cultural context, because Christianity is so much a part of our culture now.

But imagine trying to explain to someone who’d never heard of Christianity, maybe an alien from another planet, that we believe a man who got the death penalty for treason, a poor man from a remote colony who died in disgrace on death row, was actually the beloved child of the God of the entire universe. We believe he was the Son of God, and he had the power to walk away from that shameful death any time he wanted to, and he chose not to.

So, you know, if you thought that loving and serving God meant that you’d never suffer, think again. If you thought that God would reward you for your faithful devotion by giving you earthly riches and an easy life, think again. If you thought that you belonged to a chosen nation or a chosen race favored by God and sure to triumph over all enemies, because God is on your side, think again. All of that boasting, all our inflated ego, all our claims to have all the answers, all our pride, our love of money and of power, our triumphalism—all that ends at the cross.

“For Jews demand signs,” Paul says, “and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified—a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Why a stumbling block to Jews? Well, if you believe that God has chosen your people, your nation, for a special role in history, that God has favored you, given you the land you inhabit, driven out the other nations before you, and showered miraculous signs of divine favor down on you, then what kind of Son of God gets executed by the imperialist occupying force that has taken over that land? From that perspective, Christ crucified makes no sense at all.

And why was this proclamation foolishness to Gentiles? You know, I’ve often thought that it has to do with the Greek philosophical idea of what God is—a Platonic ideal of goodness and beauty and truth, that, because it’s a perfect ideal, cannot change and therefore can’t suffer or die. But I’m starting to wonder, too, if it might have just as much to do with the fact that the Roman world loved wealth and class and status and power just as much as we do, and the idea of God being associated with anything poor and weak and downtrodden is just laughably offensive.

Sometime in the early third century, less than two hundred years after the death of Jesus, somebody in Rome scratched a crude piece of graffiti in a plaster wall. They drew a crucified man with the head of a donkey and a Roman soldier honoring him. And they captioned this masterpiece, “Alexamenos worships his god.”

“Foolishness to Gentiles,” indeed, “but to those who are called,” Paul says, “both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” In the cross, the power of God is revealed in weakness and the wisdom of God is revealed in foolishness. In the humiliating death of Jesus, God-forsaken on the cross, we see a divine love that will never forsake us—love that is with us even in our humiliation, our suffering, and our death.

Paul goes on from there to talk about the people in the church at Corinth, and invite them to consider their own backgrounds: “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But 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, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

God chose the foolish, the weak, the low and despised, and we see that not just in the cross, at the end of Jesus’ ministry, but at the very start, the beginning of his sermon on the mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus says, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” God smiles on the poor in spirit, he says, God smiles on those who mourn, on the meek and the merciful on the peacemakers and the pure in heart, on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. God smiles on the persecuted immigrants, on the homeless poor, on those who cry out for justice. God has chosen them so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” I hope we don’t lose sight of how scandalous, how counter-cultural, how upside-down “the message about the cross” is even now.

In a world that values power and strength, that puts its trust in military might and imposes its will through militarized police, we worship the one who became powerless, who became vulnerable for us, who suffered and died at the hands of the Empire’s power.

In a world of rampant consumerism, a world that values wealth, we worship the one who had no place to lay his head, we honor the sacred worth of all people, rich and poor alike, and we give generously to serve those in need.

In a world of violence and polarization, a world that values being right and winning arguments, we worship the Prince of Peace, we love our enemies and we strive for justice and peace among all people.

And in a world of jaded cynicism, where caring too much about anything is cringe-worthy, we continue to care, to love, and to pray. We proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and we live out that good news by serving each other and serving the least among us in a community built on kinship and communion, by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.

“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Thanks be to God.