

Today we are given the opportunity to look into the book of *Sirach*, part of an intertestamental collection known as the Apocrypha. Catholic and Orthodox Christians refer to these writings as the Deuterocanonical books. They were written during the roughly 400-year period between the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and the Gospels and Epistles (the New Testament). While not universally regarded as fully authoritative Scripture, some traditions—particularly Protestant communities—include them as useful and instructive reading, positioned between the Testaments.

{By the way, if you had any of these words – intertestamental, Deuterocanonical or Apocrypha – on your bingo card for words used during today’s service, you’ve automatically won a prize (you can pick up a bonus Epiphany Star Gift Word)!}

I admit that because the Apocryphal writings are not part of the Protestant canon, I have hardly explored them at all. I’m grateful for their inclusion in the lectionary so that we can explore the wisdom they have to offer.

One of the books in the Apocrypha goes by a couple of names – either *Sirach*, which is a shortened version of the name of the author, Jesus

ben Sira, or, Ecclesiasticus (which is confusing because it sounds so much like the book of Ecclesiastes from which we get the text “3:1 For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; etc.”) Yeah, confusing. So, we’ll just go with the simplified name of the book, Sirach.

Sirach wrote during the time when the people of ancient Palestine were under the rule of the Greeks – about 200 years before Jesus of Nazareth (*our* Jesus). The Book of Sirach is a collection of wisdom teachings that offer practical guidance on faithful living, covering ethics, family life, friendship, humility, and reverence for God within the Jewish tradition. It also reflects on Israel’s history and law, affirming that true wisdom is rooted in God and expressed through righteous, disciplined living.

Living under wave after wave of empire, the people of Israel had to remind themselves that Adonai—the One Jesus ben Sirach called “the Creator of all things”—had chosen to dwell with them and nourish them with wisdom. Sirach imagines Wisdom roaming the earth in search of a home, until the Most High says:

8 “Encamp in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.’

9 Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. ...

12 I took root in an honored people;
in the portion of the Lord is my inheritance.”

Several centuries later, the author of the Gospel of John echoes this same conviction. Where Sirach speaks of Wisdom, John speaks of the Word and the Truth:

2 The Word was present to God from the beginning.

3 Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being.

...

14 And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us; ...

17 For while the Law was given through Moses, the Gift – and the Truth – came through Jesus Christ.

On the Sunday closest to Epiphany, we often focus on the Magi and their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. While those gifts carry deep symbolism, they are soon packed away in our lives of faith just as their replicas are boxed away with the other characters in the creche and put into the attic for another year. However, the promise of Word, Wisdom, and Truth dwelling among us is something far richer and more enduring.

If Wisdom has truly chosen to encamp with us, life becomes more than an endless cycle of waking, consuming news, working, and sleeping. We are invited to live attentively, finding meaning amid the ordinary. Not because God dictates each moment, but because Wisdom encourages us to seek God's will—even knowing we will fall short.

There is a portion of a prayer by 20th Century American monk and mystic, Thomas Merton that says this,

My Lord God ... the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. (<https://tinyurl.com/ThomasMertonPrayer>)

If we understand that God dwells with us, we have the opportunity to pay attention to how we are living. In fact, we have the opportunity to live our lives as if God is paying attention to how we are living. Which, if we go into the living of our days with the desire to please God, we can do so with a modicum of peace in our hearts. It doesn't mean that we will act like the stereotype of a saint. It doesn't mean that we will not hurt others. Nor that we will fall short of the people we desire to be. It just means that we're showing God that we are paying attention

to how we're living our lives - and we have the intention of doing so in a manner that brings God joy.

One of the ways we have tried to begin some intentionality to the living of our days at the beginning of each year is to be given a star-shaped piece of paper that has what we call a "gift-word" on it. The words on the stars on the table are quite ordinary words - some might seem "churchy" but most are not. What we do with these words is use them as an anchor point for seeking to catch a glimpse of God's Wisdom as we go through our year. I would like to invite anyone who picked up a word a year ago and could share with us a story of how that word impacted you in 2025 to do so. Or, if there is a word from a particular year that still resonates with you, you are welcome to share that story.

As folks summon their bravery to share with us, I want to remind you that when we share communion with one another in a few minutes, you will have the opportunity to pick up a new Star Gift Word.

{Remember, if you had one of those big words like "Deuterocanonical" on your bingo card you can pick up a bonus star. 😊}