While in New York a couple of weeks ago, Julia and I spent an afternoon at the American Museum of Natural History. A massive complex, the museum is located about half way up the west side of Central Park. Julia and I have been there before. There’s a lot to see, with the permanent collection quite large. There are also special, seasonal exhibits. During our recent visit, there was a seasonal exhibit on color. In the past, we’ve visited a seasonal exhibit devoted to butterflies. Along with these seasonal exhibits and the permanent collection, there’s also a planetarium with a movie theatre built into it. The featured film varies so as to attract return visitors. Julia always wants to visit the globe-shaped theatre so we might watch the latest film; with the images projected above us and around us on the upper half of the globe. I myself like to visit the wings related to dinosaurs.

During our recent visit to the American Museum of Natural History, I was able to do something I’d never done before. I was able to visit all the wings dedicated to dinosaurs and other ancient, extinct creatures. Ever since I saw the remains of a dinosaur in St. Paul when I was a little boy, I’ve been fascinated by them. Julia does not necessarily share in this fascination, which is why I had never been able to view the entire exhibit until now. Having now done so, I can tell you everything was once much, much bigger than it is today. Even rabbits and rodents and other small mammals were once monstrously large. Given that there’s no mention of this in the Bible, what’s a person of faith to do with the sight of such things.

One option would be to reject the scientific record altogether. This would be to prioritize biblical history over the history documented and uncovered by science. It would be to make the Bible not just a bearer of ultimate, here’s how it’s all going to end truth, but also a collection of inerrant historical records. The strength of this approach would be the recognition that human wisdom and divine wisdom can come into tension with one another; with divine wisdom being the more trustworthy of the two. It’s the fork in the road where both Jesus and Peter find themselves in our reading from Mark.

In this reading, there’s a tension, a disconnect, between the priority we customarily place upon self-preservation and the priority God places upon self-emptying and self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good. In response to this tension, Jesus puts his mind to divine things. For his part, Peter puts his mind to human things. With Jesus eventually resurrected from the dead and sin, death, and the devil defeated in the process, it’s clear that setting the mind to divine things was the better way to go. But does this tension between faith and wisdom always exist? Is it possible for faith and wisdom to be integrated in some cases, with wisdom even having its own domain and sphere of operation?

In speaking of those who would choose biblical history over scientific history, I’ve just indicated there would be some who would answer such questions in the negative; saying that faith has to triumph over wisdom every time. On the other side of the fence would be those who say wisdom has to triumph over faith every time. Their interactions with dinosaurs and planetariums would lead them to conclude that the Bible and a life of faith are a farce and that wisdom should be the only road map for our lives down here under the sun. Dug-in, polarized, it’s where many of our neighbors find themselves these days. It’s all faith or all wisdom. But is this really how it has to be? Can there be no integration? Can wisdom have no room for faith and faith no room for wisdom?

Let’s start with what I said last week. Last week I identified faith as God’s terms, as God’s expectation, for here and now living. This clearly gives faith the upper hand over wisdom, but it doesn’t necessarily box wisdom out of a life of faith. Today’s reading from Proverbs clearly says wisdom is present and available in our world and we should make ample use of it. In fact, our reading from Proverbs says that wisdom has the power to deliver us from calamity. Later on in Proverbs we learn this is the case because wisdom is God’s first creation; the master builder God turns to again and again. This lends itself nicely to something we Lutherans have always said. Starting out at a time when priests were thought to be a rung or two higher than everybody else, we’ve always said that traditional notions of priestly service are too limiting. We’ve said there an awful lot of priests in the world and in the Church who don’t answer to “pastor” or “reverend.”

For us, the contractor and the real estate agent can be priests. For us, the pharmacist, the doctor, the RN, the LPN, and the nurse’s aide can all be priests. For us, the teacher, the daycare worker, and the stay-at-home parent can all be priests. There really are very few limits to what can qualify as priestly service for us. If you’re using God’s gifts of wisdom and experience to keep people safe and healthy, to build stronger communities, to help the Church do its work, you’re a priest and our reading from Proverbs tells us there should be plenty of room for all kinds of priestly service in the life of the Church. Provided its serving what we might call godly ends, there’s plenty of room for wisdom in a life of faith. It’s a reality we’ve been embracing more and more here at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church.

By way of example, the Richland Police Department has used its wisdom and experience to tell us our church and our day care center are not secure. As your pastor, I can tell you this is true. Earlier this year, I had to spend some time with a Richland police officer working through a security concern for which there was no easy fix. Should this wisdom and experience be ignored here at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church? With the experience of other people telling us that schools and sanctuaries are no longer safe and sacred, should we really go it by faith alone here at 1000 Scalp Avenue? Not! To hearken back to our reading from Proverbs, this would be to invite the calamity that a failure to employ God’s gift of wisdom can invite. And so, we’ve just gotten done upgrading our security systems and protocols in response to the edicts of wisdom and experience. But getting back to what I was saying about Jesus and Peter earlier, there will be times when faith and wisdom come into conflict and faith is the better way, the wiser way, the safer way forward. When will these times for faith alone present themselves?

When we are in danger of rebelling against God’s wisdom and replacing it with a wisdom of our own. Our reading from Proverbs gets at this when it speaks of those who are having a hard time because they hated knowledge and did not practice the fear of the Lord. As is usually the case with Hebrew poetry, these statements are two sides of the same coin. Couplet A, the one about knowledge, and couplet B, the one about the fear of the Lord, complement one another; amplifying and expanding what each couplet says without the other. In our case, this means knowledge and the fear of the Lord can and do go together, but not if knowledge departs from the fear of the Lord or if the fear of the Lord has no room for knowledge.

When will we need to be people of faith alone? When we replace God’s wisdom with a wisdom of our own. It’s why in more than one place the book of Proverbs says those who fear the Lord either hate evil or refrain from evil. Wisdom that departs from God’s way, wisdom that serves evil, is not wisdom. It’s to be avoided at all costs, being replaced by faith every time. And what is evil? I’ll have more to say about that question next week. For now, let’s just say wisdom and the fear of the Lord have been severed when wisdom finds us departing from the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. If no such departure from Jesus is involved, wisdom is just fine and we should use it robustly to ward off calamity. Amen!