

Text: Proverbs 5.1-14

Title: Ash Wednesday: Danger Signs

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

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Proverbs 5.1-14

My child, be attentive to my wisdom;
incline your ear to my understanding,
²so that you may hold on to prudence,
and your lips may guard knowledge.
³For the lips of a loose woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
⁴but in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.
⁵Her feet go down to death;
her steps follow the path to Sheol.
⁶She does not keep straight to the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it.
⁷And now, my child, listen to me,
and do not depart from the words of my mouth.

⁸Keep your way far from her,
and do not go near the door of her house;
⁹or you will give your honour to others,
and your years to the merciless,
¹⁰and strangers will take their fill of your wealth,
and your labours will go to the house of an alien;
¹¹and at the end of your life you will groan,
when your flesh and body are consumed,
¹²and you say, 'Oh, how I hated discipline,
and my heart despised reproof!
¹³I did not listen to the voice of my teachers
or incline my ear to my instructors.
¹⁴Now I am at the point of utter ruin
in the public assembly.'

For the sake of CONTEXT ... The SIGN you see on the screen tonight stands about 68 miles north of Kiev in Ukraine – just a hair below the border with Belarus. Students of language may recognize the lower language as Russian – a variant of the old Cyrillic alphabet ... IN THE TWO languages most likely to be RECOGNIZED BY anyone who approaches it, this sign warns: *Danger!*

In reality, we're used to seeing DANGER SIGNS in the course of a week:

- Danger ... *Don't Walk*
- Danger ... *Do not operate heavy machinery after using*
- Danger ... *Oxygen in use*
- Danger ... *Alligators may be present ... Flammable liquids ... High voltage ... Poison ... Construction Zone ... No Swimming*
- Danger ... *Associate Pastor in Cranky Mood*

If we're non-anxious types – RATHER than cringing behind our couches because SOOOO MUCH out there could hurt us! – we INGEST the information and proceed with a FIGURATIVE THIRD EYE surveying the scene ... We've been reminded to exercise CAUTION – to recall that POTENTIALLY LETHAL consequences exist if we forget the nature of our context.

Maybe we'll get lucky ... No cars will ZOOM through the intersection at the PRECISE moment we ignore the sign ... No furtive alligators will lurk within SNAPPING distance as we SPLASH in the pond ... But we have been FOREWARNED ... There is DANGER here ...

Though international reports vary to some degree,¹ much evidence suggests that THIS SIGN would not be in place – at least, not quite like THIS – were it not for the RECKLESS CHOICES of two highly placed, well educated humans ... who ignored their better judgment.

¹ I found several reports of mixed clarity – opting ultimately to rely on the IAEA website and Rushworth M. Kidder's book, especially since fairly recent reports show that Kidder has continued to lecture on the scenario as presented here – and his role as an ethics expert hinges on his credibility.

This DANGER sign stands outside the CEMENT SARCOPHAGUS of Chernobyl ... site of the MOST DEVASTATING nuclear accident in history. In the early morning of April 26, 1986, Chernobyl spewed the equivalent RADIOACTIVITY of as many as 400 Hiroshima bombs into the atmosphere.²

Rushworth Kidder – founder and president of the Institute for Global Ethics – describes the incident as a profound MORAL MELTDOWN – rather than a mere failure of engineering.

In his provocative book *How Good People Make Tough Choices*,³ Kidder quotes on-site engineers with whom he met at Chernobyl three years after the crisis – when he was one of the first Western journalists GRANTED a close look at the ill-fated plant and its surrounding GHOST TOWN.

Citing these experts, Kidder describes two UNNAMED Soviet electrical engineers – seated on that long-ago Spring morning at the control panel of Reactor Number Four. Without any real authority – or so claimed Soviet authorities to the International Atomic Energy Agency – these two decided to see how long the turbine would freewheel when the power was removed⁴ ... sort of a “how long can it sustain” SAFETY TEST.

Maybe these men possessed an ARROGANT overconfidence in the reliability of their technology ... Or maybe they DELUDED themselves that NOTHING REALLY BAD could happen.

Whatever their rationale ... Step-by-step, they shut down the reactor. “To do so,” Kidder writes, “they had to override six separate computer-driven alarm systems. The alarms kept flashing signals up on the screen – the Russian equivalents of *Stop! Go no farther! Reverse course!*

“Refusing to shut down their experiment, they switched off the alarms. When the cleanup crews got into the facility sometime after the explosion, they found valves padlocked in the open position to PREVENT them from automatically shutting down in a fail-safe mechanism that might have prevented the disaster.”⁵

When these men SILENCED the final alarm, the reactor’s power had dipped to a fraction of its normal input. Then ... within SECONDS, the power escalated ...

“Sensing the danger,” Kidder writes, “the engineers cut loose the cooling rods hanging above the reactor core. The rods should have fallen by gravity into holes in the core and moderated the reaction.” But the intense heat – soaring ultimately to 2,250 degrees CELSIUS – had already warped the rods ... They JAMMED ... Two explosions followed in quick succession – BLASTING a giant crater and IGNITING close to 30 different RADIOACTIVE fires throughout the plant – a CONFLAGRATION firefighters battled for nine days ... Tracing the wind, fallout SCATTERED across the Northern Hemisphere ...

Twenty-four years later, humans are STILL CALCULATING the damage from that blast. Officially 31 people – including the two unnamed engineers and numerous firefighters – DIED ... Tens of thousands were displaced from their homes ... Nearby towns were SHUTTERED ... Cancer rates SOARED ... A circle 18 miles in radius around Chernobyl is still too “hot” for habitation ... The ENTOMBED REACTOR – and the estimated TON of plutonium it houses – must remain intact for centuries ... as long, some say, as the Egyptian pyramids have already been standing.⁶

WHY did these engineers RISK so much – so much that affected SO MANY other lives, including the lives of their loved ones ... that reached SO FAR beyond themselves? Who can measure the FISCAL and EMOTIONAL cost of this one RECKLESS act? Do you think, if they had lived and COULD TAKE IT BACK, they would?

² <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Features/Chernobyl-15/chno-faq.shtml> [accessed 18 February 2010]

³ Rushworth M. Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995, 30-33

⁴ Ibid., 31

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 32

“DANGER,” it announces in English and Russian ... AND the story behind that SIGN is filled with heartbreak and waste and arrogance and recklessness and WOE.

The scripture passage we read this evening FUNCTIONS as an AXIOMATIC DANGER sign for all who will listen ... It, too, is CRAFTED in language that ALMOST ANY HUMAN who NEARS IT can understand – in the syntactical structure of SEXUAL ETHICS.

A savvy PARENT – Father or perhaps Mother – warns a child about the RIPTIDE of sexual license outside the marriage covenant.

“DANGER ...” the parent says. “People who have gone this way before have EXPERIENCED MELTDOWN ... They’ve LEFT HORRIFIC fallout in their wake ... They may ONCE have protested that THEY were NOT REALLY vulnerable ... They may have felt convinced that FAIL-SAFE MECHANISMS were in place to protect them ... They may have EXPERIMENTED to see JUST HOW LONG they could endure – sort of a self-delusional “SAFETY TEST” ... They may have believed the LIE that their actions concerned only THEM – and that it wouldn’t SPEW FALLOUT across their circle of influence and on EVERYONE who came after them ... But BE WARNED, my child ...”

He says, in effect, “This is NUCLEAR territory – and its AFTER-AFFECTS will linger FOR YEARS.”

The context for the parent’s warning: The ever-present TEMPTATION toward adultery ... So prevalent – and so likely to confront a human being – that God folded WARNING of it into the DECALOGUE ...our Ten Commandments.

God knows how FRAGILE we humans are ... He knows what DESTRUCTION can SPIN OUT of ONE reckless choice ... So throughout scripture GOD raises the danger sign.

Right about now, some of us are thinking: *Well, not me ... I would NEVER do something like that! Oh, really? ...* Scripture warns: If you think you’re so trustworthy, be careful lest you fall!⁷

Others are thinking: *Oh, no! ... I’m busted. Probably everyone around me is looking over here and realizing that I am guilty ... Try to act nonchalant.*

Still others are agonizing over choices from our past – wishing we could reclaim some moment that still haunts us ... that was SOOO not worth the cost ...

Others YET are HARUMPHING that OUR circumstances are different – and these narrow-minded guidelines fail to recognize that MY SITUATION is special.

In truth, the warning INCLUDES and SUPERSEDES adultery ... Though the PRETEXT encompasses that, this passage and others like it SIMULTANEOUSLY function as METAPHOR ... Warning against FOLLY or SIN that masquerades as EXCITEMENT.

“The lips of a LOOSE WOMAN⁸ drip honey,” the parent says, “and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood.”

WORMWOOD – the aromatic and poisonous plant that embitters waters in the APOCALYPTIC last days of Revelation 8 ... WORMWOOD ... The name assigned by C.S. Lewis to his fictional demonic envoy in *The Screwtape Letters*.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 10.12

⁸ Lest a reader presume a negative bias against women here, note that in Proverbs 1-9, the writer personifies Wisdom as a woman!

Fascinatingly enough, the RUSSIAN word for WORMWOOD? ... *Chernobyl*.⁹

In other words, the parent says, “THE DELICIOUS promises and SMOOTH speech of FOLLY ... of SIN ... It promises LAUGHTER and SATISFACTION ... HIGH gain and LOW cost ... BUT in the end, it’s all as BITTER as CHERNOBYL.”

The ways of SIN lead to death, the parent warns ... and THE INSTIGATOR doesn’t even REALLY have a CLUE. “Her ways wander, she does not know it” (v. 6).

In v. 7 the WISE ONE reiterates the SUMMONS of v. 1: LISTEN TO ME ... Don’t listen to the LIES of the adulteress ... of PERSONIFIED SIN ... Listen to ME ...

Be CAREFUL, the writer seems to INTERWEAVE ... Don’t listen to smooth talk and empty promises – Listen to one who’s trustworthy ... who knows the COST ... *Be CAREFUL who you listen to.*

Having IDENTIFIED the FALLOUT, he SQUARELY PLACES the DANGER SIGN: “Keep your way far from the temptress ... do NOT GO NEAR the door of her house.”

TONIGHT, when we spoke the Lord’s Prayer, we prayed, “Lead us not into temptation.”

With respect to the “strange woman,” the parent specifies the human task of avoiding temptation, whatever that may be (5.8). Both the prayer and the task of watching our step are necessary. The ancient Latin proverb says, “Pray and work” (*Ora et labora*). That is, work at what you pray for, knowing that the gift of grace is often the gift of work (Phil 2.13).¹⁰

The particular sins we pray about and work at avoiding vary according to our position and personality.¹¹

- If you have a problem with alcohol, don’t go to a bar
- If you’re a Christ-follower and your job causes you to travel, don’t go to singles bars
- If you struggle with overeating, don’t hang out in ice cream parlors
- If you struggle with LUST, don’t surf the web to see if you might just spot a LINK ... or go to a website “just this once”

In other words ... LET’S NOT set ourselves up for failure ...

No matter what we think, WE – right here – are vulnerable. WE mustn’t even go near the TENT that will LULL us into thinking that the THRILL of one reckless moment is worth a PROFOUNDLY unfaithful choice.

We get to choose our path ... Let’s pay attention to the DANGER SIGNS.

If we don’t, the cost might be unbearable.

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⁹ OK, I don’t speak Russian, but I did confirm this learned-long-ago fact via an independent source.

¹⁰ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in Leander Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume V*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, 70.

¹¹ Ibid. Leeuwen suggested several of these examples.