

**Growing Wisdom & Wonder  
Inaugural Address**

Dr. James E. Brenneman – September 9, 2006

I.

Students, faculty and staff of Goshen College, Boards of Directors and distinguished guests, friends and family, I am deeply grateful for your presence here today. *Mis hermanos y hermanas queridos, muchas gracias por su presencia.* My abiding thanks goes also to my predecessors, Presidents Burkholder, Stoltzfus, Weaver and Showalter. Each of you have contributed much to the betterment of Goshen College. I am humbled to join you in this noble calling.

I offer special thanks to you, John Yordy. You have gone the “second mile” in your work as Interim President (and Provost), during the last 21 months. Thank you. And also thank you, Winnie, for your tireless support of John and Goshen College.

I once read that good college presidents have both a curiosity for learning and an unquenchable love for people. If that is in any way true of me, I owe what curiosity for learning I have to my father, who’s now among the great cloud of witnesses present but unseen here today. Thanks dad. As for the joy I get from meeting new people, anywhere anytime and at every opportunity, those genes come from my mother. Lord knows, if these festivities lasted a day or two more, she would probably know each of you by name and what your favorite meal was. Thanks mom for that part of my DNA, for being here and for your undying support these many years.

In getting ready for this day, I feel a bit like we’ve been planning a wedding or an awesome birthday party, which reminds me of how deeply grateful I am to you Terri and Quinn for your sacrificial love. We considered releasing a bunch of doves and balloons, but then remembered how in one wedding where that was done, a balloon popped and the doves went bonkers and well, you can imagine – feathers and – well, let’s just say, many outfits had to be dry-cleaned. So we decided against doves. Still, I am thankful for all those who worked hard to bring this day to fruition.

II.

Life is so short. Our days, like leaves of grass, are “too soon gone,” the Psalmist declares (Psalm 90:10). My father was the same age I am today when I saw him for the last time. He died the summer after my first year at Goshen College, 32 years ago. I am keenly aware today, not only of the brevity of life in general, but how “too soon gone” are the glorious days of even the longest presidencies of Goshen College. All of us who love Goshen College so deeply are blessedly aware that ours is but one small stem, one branch, a leaf of a tree whose roots run deeper and wider than any one individual or even one generation of individuals.

Indeed, Goshen College, now 112 years old, is but a small branch of a bough of a shoot first imagined by the poet and prophet Isaiah well over two and a half millennia ago. Two hundred years before Confucius, three hundred years before Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Isaiah had articulated a view of the world, a way of knowing, an epistemology that proved to be grandeur and more comprehensive than that of these later Greek philosophers so important to Western Enlightenment reasoning.

Isaiah in the near East and the pre-socratics in the West had imagined that wisdom included in its ranks the artist, the poet, the musician, the mother, the day-laborer, the athlete, the healer, the farmer, the wonder-worker, the seer, the prophet, even the cobbler. Plato and Aristotle by contrast believed such artisans and poets, laborers and god-fearers, were incapable of attaining the highest plane of wisdom, which was for them, the rational, abstract, theorist embodied in the philosopher (-king). Thankfully, in 2006, liberal arts colleges and universities are beginning to overcome some of the biases against the narrow supremacy of the Enlightenment mind. However, higher education still often falls short, when it comes to accepting the poet-prophet Isaiah's comprehensive view of gaining true wisdom.

### III.

Isaiah, ever the good empiricist, is alive to nature. He notices dew on grass, the moon and its shadows, glorious snow-capped mountains, eagles soaring. He notices the stumped remains of a tree sheered to the ground, whose roots he knows run deep. He notices a stump, a shoot growing out of the stump. His empiricism turns into poetry. He feels and thinks his way into knowledge seeing through to the significance of his findings. "Any fool can know," Einstein would later say, "The point is to understand." The proverb writer said much the same thing: "With all your knowledge, get understanding." Isaiah went for understanding! He had an 'aha!' moment, an Archimedes-like-'Eureka!' moment. And like Archimedes, we know that Isaiah was also given to running naked in the streets.

Isaiah had a revelation, an inspiration, a knowing, not unlike Charles Townsend, the Nobel Prize winner of physics (1964) and co-discoverer of the laser. I once heard him describe how after months and months of hard work in the lab, it was while he was sitting in the park daydreaming that he had, what he calls an epiphany, something like an inspired revelation that led to the discovery of the laser. Certainly Townsend was aware of Louis Pasteur's aphorism, "In the fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind." Just as certainly, Isaiah's long-years of political and historical reflection sparked in him a revelation of immense historical, theological, anthropological, sociological, epistemological – did I say, soteriological? – importance. [That list was for you, Professor Keim.]

Isaiah saw a shoot growing out of a stump. He dared to give significance to those observations. Out of the stump (of Jesse) – a stump representing Israel carried into Assyrian captivity – a branch would grow out of its roots and become the embodiment of wisdom, a philosopher-king (Hezekiah?) of a different order: "The Spirit of the LORD

would rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom, and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”

#### IV.

The spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might (power) and knowledge spoken of by Isaiah are the quintessential descriptors of the best educational institutions (secular and religious) known to human-kind. This messianic figure, described by Isaiah and believed by Christians to be Jesus of Nazareth, would be a Messiah who would welcome the very natural human capacities of learning as being good in their own right. Isaiah (and Jesus Christ) honor the best of human learning.

Each thought or feeling, each decision, every trial and error, every experiment, each piece of data collected, each brain-wave of cognition, a mile ran, a shoe cobbled, a corn-row planted, images under a microscope, life acted on stage, the brush upon canvas, words heard, read, written and sung – all of these marvelous capacities of human learning and understanding that we celebrate in our lives and in our colleges and universities and here at Goshen College are given, like rain and sunshine, as gifts of God poured out upon all humankind, the “just and unjust.” The created world, with its natural laws and structures, is a trustworthy field of inquiry for inquiring minds. In the biblical world view, *biblical* humanism is an honorable brand.

#### V.

But our educational task is not complete by simply becoming passionate learners of all that there is to know from the vantage point of human capacity. Wisdom and understanding, counsel, might and knowledge, as God-given and wonderful as they are, must be embedded in the larger narrative of Scripture. These five words of learning are book ended in Isaiah’s poetic description by two other phrases: “the Spirit of the LORD” and “the Fear of the LORD.”

It is these two additional sources of knowledge, “the Spirit and Fear of the LORD” that by definition and law, secular universities cannot hope to include in their curriculum and, by choice and law, fall short of a truly comprehensive trans- and intercultural liberal arts experience. These two sources of wisdom, when accompanying the other five, offer the most balanced educational experience a student might hope for, better than the best schools that don’t.

If a Christ-centered top-tiered educational institution such as Goshen College continues to open itself to “the Spirit and Fear of the LORD,” in the context of all other forms of wisdom, several outcomes will become increasingly transparent to all who study here. I will mention but three:

First, our capacity for wonder will grow. If the “Fear of the LORD” means anything, certainly one of its definitions lies within the semantic range of “awe” or “wonder.” Aristotle’s rather famous phrase “philosophy begins with wonder” sounds absolutely right-on, *except* that he goes on to argue that wisdom ends with wonder having been completely removed by the “higher” plane of theoretical knowledge. Sadly, too

many schools of higher education have weaned us away from the passion and wonder of learning.

Last week, late one evening, we were walking with friends back into the house with their five-year old son. All of a sudden, he stopped dead in his tracks and looked up at the waning gibbous moon bright in the night sky. In the most reverent soliloquy ever, he began, “I wish I may, I wish I might, the first moon up in the sky” . . . from there he began a prayer for the whole world, which turned into the pledge of allegiance to the flag and to God, which turned into a marvelous blessing upon his family and his home. We adults were flabbergasted with delight. The wonder of the moon, God’s moon, was ours to behold in a new way that night.

In her marvelous book, *Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson writes, “It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision [of a child], that true-instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood.” Let us never lose our capacity for wonder. Though it is awfully tempting to become cynical while learning to be appropriately critical, one cannot be complacent or cynical and wonder at the same time. Again it was Albert Einstein who said, “If there is a skeptical star, I was born under it, yet I have lived all my days in complete astonishment.” The wisdom of Isaiah invites us to live all our days in complete astonishment under the Spirit and Wonder of the Lord.

Secondly, if we invite the “Spirit and Wonder of the Lord” into the educational experience at Goshen College, then we will become ever more the servant leaders, global citizens, compassionate peacemakers our core values declare us to be.

If we invite the Spirit to be poured out upon us as it was upon the Branch of Jesse (the Christ-figure) of Isaiah’s vision, then we, like he, will seek “equity and justice for the poor (Isaiah 11:3).” We will give up power to become a Servant to others (Servant songs), ultimately dying so that others might live. The Apostle Paul, interpreted Isaiah’s vision as referring to Christ-crucified who he declared to be “the [very] “wisdom and power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). Here wisdom and power were revealed in sacrificial love, not defended by the will-to-power and survival of the fittest world of too many philosophers and political leaders, then and now.

Such a vision of Christ-crucified as the true wisdom and power of God suggests that Christian higher education, if it claims to be Christ-centered, will not ghettoize wisdom as a private internalized experience, as important as such experiences may be. Nor will Christian higher education defend wisdom and truth with coercive power or educate future leaders toward that end. The democratic spirit of wisdom cannot be forced, its weapon is persuasion. The Apostle Paul knew how hard such a pedagogy would be. It would sound like “foolishness” to the world, yet it was and remains the very wisdom of God (and good pedagogy besides).

The roots of Goshen College reach down deep into the soil of the Anabaptist Mennonite movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Then and there, a group of radical Christ-

centered university students reclaimed the truth of God's wisdom as cruciform in nature and nonviolent in character. They called for separation of church and state, a democracy of values in which the vote and voice of a person is an established non-coercive norm, two hundred years before it would be enshrined in the constitutions of almost all modern democracies. They were the thought-leaders of their day when such ideas seemed foolish and unrealistic to a watching world.

At Goshen College, like our forebears of faith, let us continue to grow university students and train thought-leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such Christ-like wisdom will be transformational to us personally and to the world socially. Such Christ-like wisdom will never be exclusively private or uncritically mainstream. Even as we continue to invest broadly in cross-cultural service around the world, may we also increase our attention locally working closely with civic and business leaders in service to the surrounding community.

Such transformation will encourage increased consideration of how best to make educational opportunities available with equity to all, locally and globally. Are we ready to respond to the tectonic shift in higher education from the developed world to the developing world that is taking place before our eyes? I believe we can, we must. At Goshen College, we must continue to raise-up tomorrow's thought leaders today who will help reshape the mental framework of the world to more closely align with the peaceable wisdom of God.

In the third place, were we to invite the "Spirit and Wonder of the LORD" to be part of the educational experience at Goshen College, our capacity for joy would greatly increase. Can there be anything more contagious than a campus filled with joy? One of my father's favorite expressions was that we must learn to "laugh with God." Good advice. For if it is true that "laughter at oneself is the nearest thing to repentance," then let us laugh ourselves into heaven or at least through graduation and beyond.

That an increase in knowledge can often lead to arrogance and god-like pride is well-known (the Garden of Eden story). That the loss of humor is one of the first symptoms of pride is often less appreciated, but no less true. Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 8 fame, who was with God in creation, who is endowed with rational thought and deep knowledge of the ages, speaks of her absolute delight in the human race, her joy in God's inhabited world (v. 30). She suggests that the art of learning, the increase in knowledge, the obtaining of wisdom under God's pedagogy brings true and lasting happiness. Would that our studies at Goshen College bring us such joy!

At Goshen College we are known for our very high academic standards. Are we also known for our laughter, our joy, our willingness to take ourselves a bit less seriously at such an august center of learning?

If tossing the President to the sharks of the Schrock Plaza fountain, if poking fun at ourselves on Monday Night Live on Saturday night, if celebrating the President's inauguration with children finger painting and just about everyone dancing in the conga line, then perhaps, we are well on our way to the kind of infectious joy that will draw others to this Christ-centered place called Goshen College and ultimately, and more significantly, to Christ, the true wisdom and wonder of God.

My soul today is filled with joy today. I pray that yours is also.