

Wisdom and the Dance

Many of you know my friend and city council colleague Loren Simmonds. In addition to being a public servant and consultant to non-profit organizations, Loren is a former Nazarene pastor and has preached here on at least one occasion. Like most preachers, Loren is given to sprinkling his discourse with various homely phrases and sayings. From time to time, at council meetings, he'll warn us not to "get out over our skis" or confess to having done so himself. I'm no skier but I think I understand the metaphor. He's talking about getting ahead of ourselves, what Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective character Sherlock Holmes called "theorizing without data," and current parlance might refer to as "talking out of your hat," or some other anatomical impossibility.

Well, I confess to you all that with this sermon I am truly out over my skis and in danger of falling right on my face. When I initially conceived of doing a sermon series on the Holy Spirit, I thought I might simply use Wayne Ward's excellent little book in the "Layman's Library of Christian Doctrine" on The Holy Spirit as an outline. One of Rev. Dr. Ward's topics in that book is the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and I knew I wanted to touch on that. But as I continued to develop the series in planning, I became fixated on the Old Testament reading from this year's Trinity Sunday lectionary as the passage that I wanted to explore. All this week, I have struggled with how to approach the chapter of Proverbs 8, only to ultimately decide to focus on the second half of that chapter but to add the first six verses of chapter 9 as well. And I'm going to throw in the second verse of Genesis and a number of others beside. If the result is incoherent, I ask for your forgiveness in advance and, in my own defense, simply fall back on that good bit of Holy Spirit theology, "the Spirit bloweth where it listeth."

Parts of what I am going to say this morning may seem repetitive from what I've said over the last several weeks. I think that is inevitable when one spends several weeks on one theological topic as we've done with this study of the Holy Spirit, or pneumatology if you want to use the fifty-cent word. And, as I mentioned on Trinity Sunday, it's exceedingly difficult to discuss the Spirit in isolation from the Father and the Son, so I'll also be talking again about trinitarianism this morning. I'm also, in a sort of follow-up to part of last Sunday's sermon on the Visitation, going to be considering some aspects of feminist theology this morning. I realize that in this I am, as the saying goes, largely preaching to the choir but I think it's important that we think about topics like women in ministry and the use of inclusive language not just as issues of fairness, as society does, but also in terms of their theological soundness. We Baptists are a people of the Book, the Bible, to be specific, and for our concepts and stances to have integrity we must be able to trace them back to the Bible and what God has revealed for us there.

So, let's start at the very beginning, or at least just one verse removed from it. In my head, there's a version of Genesis 1:2 which is probably an amalgam of several actual versions and it says, "And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters." The important sentence here is the description of the Spirit as brooding over the face of the waters. Oddly, although it's a phrase that I feel that I must have learned as a child, the only printed translation I can find that uses it is Eugene Peterson's The Message, which wasn't published until 2001. Its significance for this morning is twofold. First, it links the Holy Spirit with the act of creation. Although we generally refer to the First Person of the Trinity, the Father as Jesus taught us to say, as Creator, this early verse in our Bible indicates that the Third Person of the Trinity was equally involved.

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This is reinforced by that word, “brooded.” This is not a reference to what peevish teenagers do in their bedrooms but to the actions of a mother bird tending her eggs, preparing them for birth. The picture is of the Holy Spirit nurturing the nascent Creation, mothering the universe in its foetal form. What caused the Big Bang? Perhaps it was the warmth of the Holy Spirit’s breast.

It’s worth mentioning at this point that this metaphor of the Spirit as mother of Creation is reinforced in Hebrew by the language itself. Our English language is one of the few that does not have an understanding of gender connected with all of its nouns. In most languages, including Hebrew, any noun is either masculine or feminine or, in some, neuter. The Hebrew word *ruach*, usually translated as “spirit” and used in this verse, is a feminine noun. Since most of the other Hebrew words used in the Bible for God, including *elohim* here, are masculine in form, this gives us our first Biblical clue that God is beyond gender, with both masculine and feminine attributes.

Like me, you may have heard for years about how this relates to a sequence just a little later in Genesis when God creates humankind in God’s own image, both male and female. But there are many, many other passages in which the feminine qualities of God are revealed. The God of the Hebrews was not, as we have often heard, simply a God of storms and thunder, of armies and hosts. In Deuteronomy, for example, Moses accuses the Children of Israel: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.” The prophet Isaiah is probably most fond of images of Yahweh as a mother. Spread out over several chapters come these verses: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant... Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save... Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you... As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” Indeed, even Jesus, the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity and every bit a man, could only describe himself in mothering terms in at least one situation: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

With this perspective, we turn now to the portrait of Wisdom in Proverbs. From near the beginning of the book, the quality of wisdom is personified: “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.” The character is, archaically “Dame Wisdom,” or often nowadays, “Woman Wisdom.” I prefer the slightly less modern version, “Lady Wisdom.” It is clear from her description in the passage I read that she is a female character, in part because the Hebrew word for wisdom, *hokhma*, is a feminine noun. This also carried over into the Greek which became the literary language in the Jewish and then Christian world for centuries, where wisdom is *Sophia*. In Proverbs, both the attribute or quality of wisdom in human beings and the personification of wisdom are associated with God. Wisdom is a gift of God, according to Proverbs, and leads humans to righteousness and justice by coming into our hearts.

This role of Wisdom as our guide should remind us of the way in which we view the work of the Holy Spirit. This connection between Lady Wisdom and the Third Person of the Trinity is

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strengthened by the role of Wisdom in God's act of creation as described in our scripture for this morning as well as in other passages of the Bible. Our New Revised Standard Version Bibles as well as several other translations list the creative acts of God and then say that Lady Wisdom "was beside him, like a master worker..."

The Presbyterian theologian and author, Frederick Buechner, still writing beautifully at age 86, writes: "She was there when he made the heaven, the sea, the earth. It was as if he needed a woman's imagination to help him make them, a woman's eye to tell him if he'd made them right, a woman's spirit to measure their beauty by. 'I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,' she says, as if it was her joy in what he was creating that made creation bearable, and that's why he created her first."

The role of Lady Wisdom in creation and Wisdom's identification with the Holy Spirit is taken up by two authors in the Deuterocanonical books of the Bible commonly used by our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters but only rarely by Protestants. The pseudonymous writer of "The Wisdom of Solomon" says of Wisdom: "There is a spirit in her which is... holy... she is a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty... Although she is but one she can do all things... she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God... She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well." Another Deuterocanonical writer, Sirach, sets down a speech in which Lady Wisdom praises herself. In it, she says, "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High and covered the earth like a mist ... Before all ages ... he created me, and for all ages I shall not cease to be. Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. ... Those who eat of me will hunger for more ... those who work with me will not sin."

In Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach and in the second verse of Genesis, *hokhma* (wisdom) or *ruach* (spirit) are seen as the creative force of God. To this point, Molly Marshall writes in Joining the Dance: "Some scholars warn against thinking of Word or Spirit or Wisdom as intermediary beings between God and the creation. Rather, they are simply distinctive ways of referring to God's active presence... While each of these characterizations of God speaks of the diverse ways in which God can dynamically communicate purpose and personal relation with the creation, all can be understood as the confronting presence of the One we can know only in Spirit, who mediates both Word and Wisdom."

Indeed, we must remember not to get too hung up on precision regarding differences between persons of the Trinity in their work and effect on our lives. The work of creation, which I have just so carefully linked to Spirit and Wisdom, which may be one and the same, is also linked in the Bible to the Word made flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Christ. In terms of Trinitarian thinking, this is most obvious in the prologue of the Gospel according to John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." We can also find this assertion on behalf of Christ in Paul's letter to the Colossians: "(The Father) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on

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earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”

Our passage in Proverbs also gives us a picture of Wisdom as reconciler, again much in the same way that we see Jesus in the New Testament. Those verses from chapter 9 which I added to the second half of the chapter 8 reading portray Lady Wisdom preparing for a banquet. When it is ready, she sends servants to go with invitations but she herself also goes out to the highways and byways, to the highest places in town where her voice will carry and calls even the simple to come to the party. These verses could be the source for Jesus’ parable of the banquet that we understand as a picture of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God. Through Lady Wisdom, through the Holy Spirit, through the Word become flesh, God summons all people into right relationship with Godself.

What does it mean, then, to “lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight?” John Holbert of the Perkins School of Theology in Dallas offers a list of the attributes that Proverbs tells us we can gain from Lady Wisdom: “shrewdness, righteous speech, a truthful tongue, counsel and prudence, even the righteousness of kings...” He also writes of the way of Wisdom that it is just “plain fun.” As evidence, he offers his own translation of Proverbs 8:30-31: “I was God’s intimate; / I was God’s delight day after day, / playing before God all the time, / playing in the world, in God’s earth; / my delight was with humankind.” “She gambols before God, her maker,” he writes, “and she shares her special delight with all human beings. Wisdom is not only the right way to go; she also offers the most pleasurable way to go.”

This understanding of Lady Wisdom as the Holy Spirit is also important, as I mentioned at the outset, because we still have so many centuries of inappropriate male domination in the Church and in the world to undo. It is important for us to regain the sense of God’s feminine characteristics alongside God’s male characteristics. In this way, we see our maleness and femaleness as necessary and equal parts of the complete and blessed picture of God’s creation. John Holbert also writes, “Given the later history of intense discussions of the three-personhood of God, the Holy Trinity, the loss of the female reality of Lady Wisdom could be seen as a momentous one for the history of male/female relationships in Christianity, leading to all manner of misogynous aberrations...”

But there is more than that, I think. When we allow for the fluid movement of God in the world, the dance between the Three Persons of God which also includes the Beloved Community, we also gain insight about setting aside the rivalries which so often drive and mar our lives. If we picture Lady Wisdom in the dance, the perichoresis which is the ancient metaphor for the Trinity, Lady Wisdom along with the Son Christ and the One who begets and anoints him, we see that the work of creation and redemption and comfort and nursing flows from them all. And if there is no rivalry in God but only loving relationship, should not that also be true in us? Can we see the wisdom of the dance?

Lady Wisdom, *hokhma*, *Sophia*; Spirit, *ruach*, *pneuma*, Wind of God. Dare we let the Spirit of God blow with Wisdom across the waters of our souls? What might her brooding, nurturing love birth in us? Could it be the new and abundant life promised by Jesus, the life everlasting? In this Pentecost season, shouldn’t we open our lives to the wind that will blow us into the dance?

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, One God and Mother of us all,
Amen.