

To Delight in Wisdom

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June 12, 2022 | Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

First Baptist Church of Rochester

The First Sunday after Pentecost

Right now churches across the world, united by the Revised Common Lectionary, are reading the Proverb that we just heard, across languages and countries, about the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit showed up to the early church in Acts through different tongues and peoples, so it is appearing to *us* in the same way this morning across the world. Not much has changed, it looks like. But the Holy Spirit is a pretty basic part of our theology as Christians today. We kind of take it for granted. Before all the councils scrambled to create theological unity, and before the early church was formed, the Holy Spirit was there, wild and unruly, and, going by the name *Wisdom* in this morning's text, was with God from the beginning.

As you probably know, Christians consider the Holy Spirit the third person in the trinity, or the family of figures that make up how Christian orthodoxy perceives God. And just like some of *us*, the Holy Spirit goes by many names. For the Hebrew people, this part of who God is was sometimes called *Ruah Elohim* or *Ruah YHWH*. Christians sometimes call this wild and free spirit of God the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, or the Holy Spirit. For the ancient Hebrews, the Spirit of God sometimes showed up as natural phenomena like doves, pillars of fire, and still small voices. And while there are some differences in Christian theology and Jewish cosmology around what exactly this part of God is, *my* take is that all people who have encountered God understand that there is a part of God that is wild, creating, and unbridled.

This morning this wild spirit goes by *Wisdom*, or, in Greek, *Sophia*. For the writer of this Proverb, *Sophia*, *Woman Wisdom*, or, for the sake of brevity, just *Wisdom*, seems to be all about the part of God's presence that is most immediately visible, that interacts with people, that acts almost like a person, and calls out to each of us individually. Just as there is the aspect of God that seems eternal, everlasting, and almighty, so God *also* seems to be deeply personal, affected by human activity, and actively involved in giving and sustaining life here on earth. This is, in a nutshell, what the Spirit means to the writer of this morning's Proverb.

There are a lot of things that stand out to me about how the proverbist experiences this part of God. The first thing I notice about his ode to the Holy Spirit is how humanlike, or anthropomorphically, she shows up in the writer's life, as if to suggest off the bat that, just like us, the Holy Spirit breathes and moves. Here's how line one opens: "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?" There is an alluring quality here, a woman calling at the crossroads to be heard, like a siren captivating people who hear her.

Then this feminine image is turned upside down by a masculine portrayal of the Spirit in which Sophia is standing tall and "raising her voice" in the way that a man might. "At the crossroads," or, in other words, in a public place, she asserts her voice so people can hear. She positions herself by the front gates of town where there are tons of people. She cries, "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live."

The lectionary skips ahead to verse 22, where Sophia asserts that "the Lord created her at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." What I hear in this is the Spirit saying that the part of God that stands like a tall and proud woman at the corners of civilization, calling out to people, is as old as God's own self, or in other words, *is* God. She stands on the heights, along the highways, at city intersections and shouts at the top of her voice.

Juliana Claassens, a Hebrew Bible scholar and professor, writes that this stuff matters, because "this female figure enters the public sphere and breaks the demure of female passivity." If you ask me, within the first few lines, the writer of this proverb has not only challenged simplistic and cliché assumptions about female identity and behavior, but by doing so suggests that braking *down* these assumptions is part of how we break *into* knowing God.

Another thing I notice about this morning's text is how the Holy Spirit asserts herself in the story of creation and identifies herself as being with God from the very beginning. She says in verse 12: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work the first of his acts of long ago." I love the idea that the first thing God did was give life to a Spirit that calls out like a woman with something to say. She continues in the next verses, saying, "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs

abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth when he had not yet made earth and fields or the world's first bits of soil." In other words, the spirit was with God like a firstborn, watching and helping the world be created. The Spirit was *with* God and *of* God, just like a daughter.

The professor I referenced earlier points out that these verses suggest the image of a giggling, joyful, little girl who laughs when God shows her God's new creations — the hilarious giraffe and hippopotamus, the monkeys and busy little ants. While God was making these things, "I was beside him," Wisdom says in verse 30. Like his little girl, she says in verse 31, "I was his daily delight, playing in his inhabited world. Delighting in the human race."

If little Sophia is a part of God, then part of how God looks at the world must mean delighting in it and playing in it like a child. Maybe that was Sophia speaking earlier when, in Genesis, God called the world "good." If so, then part of this delighting means celebrating human beings and delighting in us!

Maybe throwing our hands up and losing hope for humankind, something that is easy for all of us to do these days, is not only unhelpful, but suggests that we know better than *God* the true nature of humans. Maybe to throw our hands up every time we see another story about people experiencing domination and oppression is to forget that, as the children's song goes, God's got the whole world in her hands— hands that look a lot like little Sophia's, hands that spring up in delight at the wonderfulness of creation and the human race, a family of people across the world that, despite all the ways we hurt and oppress, God dares to call delightful.

So this is our work then: to *delight* in the human race like a child delights in things she doesn't know and can't control. A formula for how we should live, right here in the Bible, laid out for us.

But how on earth are we supposed to do that when we're capable of such cruelty and hatred? The news stories flashing across our TV screens and phones don't seem to be portraying the same human race as the one Sophia sings about this morning. I'm a little bit confused.

I don't use the word "delight" very often in my day-to-day speech. I'm not sure why, but it doesn't seem to be a verb I hear outside of literature and poetry all that much. I hear the adjective form of the word more often

(*delightful*), but I don't think I've ever said casually that I *delight* in something. Maybe it's because to *delight* isn't like anything else. It isn't to fully approve of or to celebrate unquestioningly, but to derive *pleasure* from. A quick look in the dictionary tells us that to delight someone is to "please them greatly."

I don't know about you, though, but the things I keep hearing that we're doing to each other don't please me greatly. So... how can we look out across the human family and, despite all the ways we keep hurting each other, follow God's instruction to take delight in who we are?

I'm not sure, but maybe to find joy in others, to delight in the human race, is not to seek to *control* the other, nor expect the other to be like *us*, but to delight in the other *as other*. Maybe *that* is what wisdom looks like. After all, the things that most delight *me* aren't things I can control. An unexpected bloom in the front yard. A sudden phone call from a friend. An opening of sun in the clouds. A sudden summer rainstorm. The sound of a piano from an open window next door. In fact, part of what lets me delight in these things in the first place is that I *can't* control them. They just *happened*, and they brought me joy.

Which reinforces what I suspect may be true: that to delight in something may be to let go of the impulse to try to control it.

Maybe in our obsession with controlling one another we've made it harder for us to delight. If we just stopped trying to control each other, could you imagine how delightful things would be? If we let people be themselves, experienced peace between countries, and stopped preventing people from accessing the resources we all need to live, imagine how different things would be.

But you and I both know that it isn't that easy. These things happen, still happen, and will happen. It isn't as easy as calling everyone together and telling everyone to stop, especially when it's you and me who are guilty of the things too sometimes.

Instead, sometimes all it seems we can do is to stand next to God and say, "I don't know why this is happening either." But this is an okay first step, because the closer we stand to God, the closer we stand to Wisdom, who, like a child, tugs at our finger and leads us out into the world to play.

Those of you who have kids or spend time around children know that young people don't always understand how evil the world can be... but adults don't always remember how delightful the place can be. So maybe wisdom isn't about knowing how awful the world can be—or about knowledge at all—and starting from there, but about refusing to believe that chaos and evil is all that there is... that the world, as messed up and scary as it can be, was made by God, and, as such, is a good, good place. To call the world irredeemable is to say that God made something that broke.

Rather, if we put on the eyes of a child, the eyes of Sophia, the eyes of Wisdom, and see the world for what it truly is, a complicated, awful, and, despite these things, very good place, maybe we'd want to help God make it *better*. Maybe we stand by God like a child and hold the tools while God hunches over the open hood of the world, trying to make things right—to stand with God amid the disorder and chaos of this world and help bring life into situations where the forces of unruliness swell and crash.

Maybe this is what it means to be wise. Not to understand what all is wrong with the world, but to want to *fix* these things, to realize that, like a child, we need God's help, and, like a growing person, might not have a full perspective on things. Maybe to trust God is to be naive.

Maybe the world is still being created. Maybe this isn't the way things *are*. Maybe God's just not finished yet. Good things take time, after all.

I could be wrong about all this. It's possible, but when we look at each other and are no longer delighted, I suspect we've forgotten that God is in each one of *us* just as the Holy Spirit is in *God*, changing us and shaping us. Maybe to look at humankind and lose delight is to lose sight of God, who, as we know, is so close-by and present that there isn't anyplace, not even the darkest recesses of human nature, where the Holy Spirit can't be found. Amen.