

“Holy Wisdom”

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

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Mason, Michigan

June 16, 2019

I’m going to teach you a couple new words this morning. Actually, they are old words – *very* old words – more than two-thousand-year-old words! – but they may be new to you. They are *important* words. They embody concepts – or, rather, *a concept* – that is older than humanity, older than *anything* in this entire universe. It’s a concept that goes back to the very beginning, before the dawn of time.

What is the concept? *Wisdom*. *Holy* wisdom. *Divine* wisdom. The wisdom of *God*.

We begin our journey in the book of Proverbs. “Does not wisdom call?” asks the writer of the book. Here is our first word: *hokhmah*, the Hebrew word for wisdom. Try it: *hokhmah*. It’s got a *chhh* sound at the beginning, like the word *Hanukah*, or *challah* bread. Try it again: *hokhmah*. Wisdom.

The word appears about 150 times in the Old Testament. 50 of those instances are in the Book of Proverbs itself – which is, of course, a book about *wisdom*. The book was written:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young. (Proverbs 1:2-4)

This is a book that is filled with wisdom. Advice, teaching, moral instruction; wisdom such as that passed down from a father to a son; *hokhmah*. Wisdom such as this:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight. (Proverbs 3:5)

and this:

Do not quarrel with anyone without cause,
when no harm has been done to you. (Proverbs 3:30)

and this:

Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of evildoers. (Proverbs 4:14)

and this:

Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives;
those who open wide their lips come to ruin. (Proverbs 13:3)

That's just a tiny sampling of the *wisdom*, the *hokhmah*, this book has to offer. If you're looking for a devotional exercise, one option is to read a chapter or proverbs a day. There are 31 chapters; that will take you a month; and you'll be *wiser* at the end of that month than you were at the beginning.

The passage before us this morning gives us some insight into the nature and origins of this *wisdom*, this *hokhmah*. We are presented with an image of wisdom personified. "Does not wisdom call? ... On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance to the portals she cries out: 'To you, O people, I call...'" (Proverbs 8:1-4) Wisdom is a *she*. Wisdom is personified as a woman, calling out with a voice that we should heed. Now, in Hebrew, as in numerous other languages, every noun has a gender; every noun is either masculine or feminine. Wisdom, *hokhmah*, is feminine. So it makes sense that it would be personified as a "she."

Wisdom is also feminine in Greek. The word "wisdom" in the New Testament is the Greek word *sophia*. (That's your second word of the day. If you know anybody named "Sophia," well, her name means "Wisdom"!) So *hokhmah* and *sophia* are the biblical words for wisdom – one Hebrew, the other Greek; one in the Old Testament, the other in the New – but *in both cases, they are feminine*.

So we have this *concept*. Wisdom. Hokhmah. Sophia. Where did it come from? Surprise, surprise – Wisdom was the *very first thing God made*: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. 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 the Lord had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil." (Proverbs 8:22-26) So Wisdom is older than *the earth itself*. Imagine our solar system, in the process of formation, four and a half billion years ago – *and wisdom already existed!* "When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker." (Proverbs 8:27-30) Wisdom was *with God* at the very beginning of the heavens and the earth; when God was in the very act of *creating them*, Wisdom was there, at his side. "And I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." (Proverbs 8:30-31) Wisdom was there when God created humanity, celebrating as *we were made*.

Remember how the Bible begins? "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2) God was there, about to start the process of

creation, but *God was not alone*. Wisdom was there, behind the scenes. And we know from John's gospel that Jesus was there, too: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." (John 1:1-2) The divine *Logos*; Jesus, the Son of God, before he took on human form. Both of them were there at the beginning, Jesus and Wisdom, with God. The Holy Spirit was there too, the "wind from God" that swept over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2); for "wind" and "spirit" are the same word in Greek.

So, before God began any of his magnificent acts of creation, there was God, *and* Jesus, *and* the Holy Spirit ... and, evidently, *Wisdom* was there too.

It's Trinity Sunday, a time to remind ourselves of the mystery of God, *one God, three persons*, Father, Son, Holy Spirit. So ... where does *Wisdom* fit in that picture? Could Wisdom somehow be part of the Holy Trinity? Instead of a Trinity, should we have a – what could we call it – a *Quadity*?

Well, relax. We're not going from a Trinity to a Quadity. At the end of this sermon, there will still just be a Trinity, one God in three persons. That's complicated enough!

So where does Wisdom fit in? Proverbs 8 tells us that Wisdom existed before *any other thing that God created*. In fact, to say that Wisdom was "created" is a bit of a misnomer; the Hebrew word doesn't really mean "create" or "make" so much as it means "possess," as in, "acquire" or "own." God didn't *create* Wisdom. But Wisdom *belongs* to God.

Long ago – like, nineteen centuries ago – some of the early Christians pondered these same questions. They found an answer in Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the *wisdom* of God." (1 Corinthians 1:23-24) Did you catch that? Jesus Christ is the *Wisdom* of God. Jesus Christ is the *Sophia* of God.

Which means that, when Wisdom calls out in the streets in the book of Proverbs, in that feminine personification – *that's Jesus talking*. It may *look* like a woman, it may *sound* like a woman, but underneath it all, it's really *the Son of God*! Evidently, when we envision Jesus, we need to imagine more than just a Jewish man. The divine Logos, the Word of God, turns out to be the same thing as *Lady Wisdom*. Once the early Christians realized that Jesus and Wisdom were the same thing, they began referring to Wisdom as "*Holy Wisdom*." Or, in Greek, *Hagia Sophia*. Perhaps you've heard that term. There have been a variety of churches through the centuries called *Hagia Sophia*, the most noteworthy of which is a marvelous sixth-century cathedral that still stands in Istanbul today. It's a church dedicated to *Holy Wisdom*. Which is to say, it's a church dedicated to *Jesus Christ*, the very Wisdom of God.

So, it turns out, Wisdom *is* part of the Holy Trinity. It's another way to refer to Jesus. And what that means is that when you read through the book of Proverbs – if you do that 31-day devotional, for example – *you'll find the words of Jesus all over the place*.

He is Wisdom. He is *Holy Wisdom*. He calls to us in the streets. May we hearken to his voice!

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