

Trinity C
Peace, Seattle
May 26, 2013
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

HOLY WISDOM IN CREATION

If I were to ask how many creation stories there are in the Old Testament, what would you answer? One? Two? More?

There are, it turns out, four creation stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. The opening two sit front to back in the opening chapters of Genesis.

The first provides us with a “macro-cosmic” view of the world’s creation from a telescopic perspective. The Creator speaks, and elements of the universe come into being in a progressive telling that unfolds with a clear rhythm and unassailable order.

The second offers a more intimate view of Creator’s work. In this version God is not above and beyond, but kneels right down in the Garden, scoops up some clay and fashions A-dam, the first human being, from the A-dam-ah, the earth. The abiding image here is of a Creator willing to get his hands dirty.

Psalm 8, the third Creation account, takes us in another direction—telling the story not through a God’s-eye perspective but through the voice of one overwhelmed by God’s majesty and overcome by God’s caring.

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars you have set in their courses, what are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them, human beings that you should care for them?

Yet you have made them little less than divine, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

And there’s one more...the one we find it in Proverbs today. In this take on Creation Wisdom, personified as a woman, speaks of herself as one who was there at God’s side as everything was coming into being.

BEFORE THE MOUNTAINS WERE GIVEN THEIR SHAPE, BEFORE THE WATERS WERE ESTABLISHED, BEFORE EARTH ITSELF WAS FOUNDED, she says, I WAS THERE!

In Michelangelo’s painting of the moment of Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, God, personified as an old man with a white beard, swinging down from heaven, stretches out his right arm extending his finger toward Adam, the first human, who likewise stretches out his hand to await God’s touch.

Michelangelo, it seems, sought to capture that instant when man became a “living soul.”

The painting famously focuses it’s attention on this first divine-human encounter, but if you look carefully at the God figure, you can see that God is not alone but is surrounded by community of figures, some cherubs, some angels bearing him up. And one more figure, the figure of a woman, halfway hidden by God, around whose shoulders God drapes his left arm.

I wonder if the woman figure isn’t Lady Wisdom herself?

One invitation that always attends Trinity Sunday is the invitation to think outside the box; to use our imaginations as we contemplate the mystery of a God whom we partly know and partly do not know.

That's what Lady Wisdom calls us to today.

From Proverbs she calls:

THE LORD CREATED ME AT THE BEGINNING HIS WORK, THE FIRST OF HIS ACTS OF LONG AGO... 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...WHEN GOD HAD NOT YET MADE EARTH AND FIELDS OR THE FIRST BITS OF SOIL. I WAS THERE.

I WAS THERE WHEN GOD ESTABLISHED THE HEAVENS,
I WAS THERE WHEN GOD DREW A CIRCLE ON THE FACE OF THE DEEP,
I WAS THERE WHEN GOD MADE FIRM THE SKIES AND ESTABLISHED THE FOUNTAINS OF THE DEEP, WHEN GOD ASSIGNED THE SEA ITS LIMIT AND MARKED OUT THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH.

How are we to imagine the role of Woman Wisdom in creation? What is the relationship between her and the Creator? Is Wisdom God's laborer? Is she an attribute of God's self? Is she God's partner in creation? The language of the text seems open to all of these possibilities.

And when it comes to the translation of verse 30, there are two tantalizing options.

The word "**amon**" which is used here is most often translated as "artisan," or, as the NRSV has it, "master worker." But an equally valid translation is "little child." Listen to how each of these possibilities shapes our hearing and understanding of the passage:

(1) I, WISDOM, WAS BESIDE GOD, LIKE A MASTER WORKER; AND I WAS DAILY GOD'S DELIGHT, REJOICING BEFORE GOD ALWAYS, REJOICING IN GOD INHABITED WORLD AND DELIGHTING IN THE HUMAN RACE.

(2) I, WISDOM, WAS BESIDE GOD, LIKE A LITTLE CHILD;¹ AND I WAS DAILY GOD'S DELIGHT, REJOICING BEFORE GOD ALWAYS, REJOICING IN GOD INHABITED WORLD AND DELIGHTING IN THE HUMAN RACE.

Do you see how the choice changes everything?

Wisdom as a skilled artisan working side by side with God, assisting God in the act of creation...

OR...

Wisdom as a toddler underfoot, keeping God on his toes, and pointing with glee to the world that is coming into being.

Given the ambiguity, perhaps there is room for both understandings to operate together.

What most strikes me about this fourth story of Creation is how DELIGHT breaks in two directions: God delights in Wisdom and Wisdom delights in the world—and especially the human race—which God is bringing into being.

One of the most popular answers, I would venture, to the question of who God is, is: GOD IS JUDGE. So many of us live our lives forever measuring ourselves against what we believe to be God's expectations for who we should be, what we should do, how we should live. And inevitably we fall short of the mark.

¹ Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, the word "amon" is connected to nursing and giving birth. See, for example, Numbers 11:12.

But Proverbs gives us a completely different kind of take on who God is. Here, God is not the one who judges, but the one who takes particular delight in our existence as human beings, and with Wisdom at his side, smiles and chortles, points and winks as our lives unfold, ever new, on this Earthly home.

What might it mean to live our lives knowing that the first impulse of the One who created us is to take delight in us? And that it is Wisdom's singular role to bring this to mind and celebrate it?

What freedom could take wing within us if we knew that, instead of a frowning, judgmental God, waiting for the next occasion to be disappointed by us, we have a God whose most natural expression is a joyful—even gleeful—smile?

Trinity Sunday, if it is anything, is a day that invites us to take the hardened images of God we carry around inside ourselves, and trade them in for wonder.

Krister Stendahl, in his book *Energy for Life*, writes:²

“I have come to experience the worship of the Triune God as a liberation from that spiritual or intellectual idolatry in which we picture God in our own image.”

Our security in God doesn't have to mean keeping God in a box. Today Wisdom calls to us from the very origins of the world, and woven through her testimony is a Creator who reaches out to us through her invitation to draw us into delighted relationship with the divine.³

Amen.

² Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, 1990. (Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 1999).

³ I am indebted to Elizabeth Webb's insights in her article on this text at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1708.