

Sermon: A World of Wisdom

Year C, Trinity

[Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

For those reading the sermon without having been able to attend the worship service where it was offered, you should know that the Children's Sermon earlier in the worship service used a hardboiled egg to help explain the Trinity (one egg, three parts: shell, white & yolk; one God, three parts, Creator, Christ and Spirit). Also, the church supports the work of [Bridges, an agency helping women victimized by and surviving domestic and sexual violence](#). A speaker from that organization had shared a bit about their work earlier in the worship service.

When you work with kids, the concept of the Trinity is a tricky one. One God, three parts. The hard-boiled egg thing is pretty good, but it still isn't really an easy idea for them to grasp. It's not really an easy idea for *us* to grasp. Mostly we get used to it, until it just seems familiar. But this is a concept that Christianity brought to the West. There had been many gods and there had been one God, but there had not been one God in three parts.

In the earliest days of Christianity, it wasn't clear how to think about Jesus. They could make a list of what he was: teacher, preacher, healer, exorcist, interpreter of the law, prophet, a great man. But they struggled because none of those seemed like enough and even put together, they seemed like they were too little. And yet going further seemed to deny that he had ever been truly human. If Jesus had been divine and not human too, then he hadn't really suffered, he hadn't really given up so much for our sake. And that seemed wrong too.

And it wasn't just some kind of intellectual exercise. People were put to death because they didn't agree with the prevailing view. One leader would excommunicate another. One side would announce a conference to gather all the leaders together, then move the date up, so that when the other side showed up, the vote had already been taken. The early centuries of Christianity were really a period of many Christianities working their way to one answer. And honestly, the answer we landed on is not the only Christianity that made it through to the present day. There are still sects of Christianity in Africa and India that have ancient roots and show different understandings of the life of Jesus Christ.

One of the techniques that all the different participants of all the different debates could agree on was canonical support. During these centuries the Christian canon, the agreed on books that would end up being called the New Testament were being identified and standardized. Ever heard of the *Shepherd of Hermas*? It almost made it. It was one of the last books of the New Testament to be dropped from the standard list. If you read the earliest Christian writers, they refer to it with as much authority as the gospels and epistles we still read today.

Another part of the debate was what to do with the Hebrew Bible. Does it have authority or not? And if it does, how do we read it in light of the arrival of the Messiah? At the time, they all reached a consensus that they should read it, but in a very particular way. They felt they should comb through it and any place they could interpret something as referring to Jesus Christ as the Messiah, then that was how that part should be read.¹ You can imagine the controversies that

¹ Daniel H. Williams, "Proverbs 8:22-31." *Interpretation* 48, no. 3 (1994), 278.

emerged from reading with that kind of agenda. Plus that approach ignored the context of the writing of the Hebrew Bible.

But that is why on Trinity Sunday we read the passage from Proverbs 8. Because that passage was used to seal the argument that Jesus was not created by God but was there from the beginning, as part of God. In the passage we read today, Wisdom says *the Lord created me at the beginning of his work*. Created. But Jesus was the *begotten* Son. When God creates something, that something is less than God. But *begotten*, begotten is a way of referring to something going on inside the Godhead that we simple humans can never understand.²

I know. They fight for 400 years and this is what wins the argument? Oh, you've got me there, begotten, not created. Of course, in all honesty, for the people who disagreed, it wasn't a real clincher. But for folks who were open to being persuaded, in the next verse Wisdom says *When there were no depths, I was brought forth*. A more literal translation is *poured forth*, like a liquid offering, like a sacrifice. For followers of Jesus, that lit a special spark. Jesus sacrificed himself for us. At the very beginning of creation, before God has anything going yet that will be described in the story of Genesis, land and air, night and day, before any of that, God is pouring forth a sacrifice from God's own being. The followers of Jesus heard that and remembered Jesus talking about being the living water, the water that lives in his followers and is poured back into eternity through their faith.³ They hear of a cycle that began long ago and continues to this day. In their struggle to figure out just how to describe Jesus in a way that matches their experience, that echo, that understanding of a self-sacrificing God who enters fully into this world, who is there as the very fabric of this world is being created, that echo comes pretty close to what they understand.

They can see that Wisdom is not Jesus. For one thing, Wisdom is clearly feminine. Not just feminine the way some words in a language a feminine and others masculine. She's personified as a woman. But if she is created so early by God, she gives them a feel for what God is like when God isn't filtered through the earthly creation or worse yet, what humanity had done to the earthly creation.

So what do they see in her? She is everywhere, not just in sacred closed off spaces limited to a few people. She's *on the heights* (Proverbs 8:2) with the soldiers and guards. She's *beside the way* (Proverbs 8:2) with the teachers and travelers. She *takes her stand at crossroads* (Proverbs 8:2) where commerce and politics, taxation and news all mix together. She's beside the *gates in front of the town* (Proverbs 8:3) where legal cases are argued and decided by the most thoughtful men of the village. Wisdom is inherent in everyday life. She's not separate from it. She's right in the heart of all of it. Just like Jesus was.

She's *speaks to everyone who lives* (Proverbs 8:4). She doesn't have one message specifically for one group of people and they're the only ones she talks to. She's speaking to everyone who will listen to her. Just like Jesus did.

At the end Wisdom says she *was God's delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race* (Proverbs 8:30-31). There is mutuality there,

² Williams, 278.

³ Eugen J. Pentiu, "A Self-Offering God and His Begotten Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22-24)." *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 46, no. 3-4 (2001), 258.

she is in the world. God and God's creation are connected with her and with each other. Just as Jesus connected God and God's creation to each other and to him.⁴

Whether the argument about "created" or "begotten" worked for you, you can see why this beautiful poem resonated for the early Christians. They could use it to see how something of God could be a part of this world and yet still be a part of God.

There is another part of this image to notice. Let's say you are standing there with an egg in your hand and you know that the clear part turns white and the yellow part goes from runny to firm and the shell can come off easily when the clear part is white but not when it's clear. Let's say you know all those things. But you want to know why. Whether you are standing in 1st century Palestine or 21st century Brookline, you can go find out. The person in 1st century Palestine may come up with a very different answer from the person in 21st century Brookline. But they will both come up with some kind of answer. How they come with their answers will probably be different. But for both of them, there will be a moment when they say, "I wonder ...". That moment, when it occurs to both of them to wonder, that comes from the outside⁵, that comes from Creation. That comes from Wisdom *crying to all that live* (Proverbs 8:4). We may be able to find the answer to something we don't know, but it takes something from outside of us to get us to ask the question in the first place. We can pursue the answer, but we can't pursue the realization that there is a question there in the first place. That comes to us from the outside. That sense of wonder can come from nature, from the people we love. But when we feel it, it reminds us of something greater than ourselves. It's a gift that we are touched by.⁶ Wisdom is the gift we are touched by that God wove into the very fabric of Creation.

Wisdom shows up every where. Wisdom talks to everyone. Wisdom connects God to God's creation and each of us to each other. Wisdom brings us wonder and helps us to grow beyond our limitations. No wonder the early Christians felt this passage did so much to explain how to articulate their experience of Jesus Christ.

And here's the thing. When a woman suffers from domestic or sexual violence, she no longer feels she can go everywhere. She no longer feels she can talk to everyone. She no longer feels connected to God or God's creation. The wonder of the world can no longer touch her because she cannot trust what comes from outside herself. Domestic and sexual violence separate women from the Wisdom that God built into this world. By supporting Bridges, we are supporting an organization that can help women reconnect with the Wisdom that has been in this world from the very beginning. When women survive and recover from domestic and sexual violence, they are connecting with the world using many of the same channels that Jesus used.

When we hear this passage from Proverbs 8, we can understand how the early Christians could use it as a bridge to understanding how Jesus could be fully human and fully divine. When we hear this passage from Proverbs 8, we can use it as a bridge to realize how much Wisdom is available to us if we would only look for her in our daily lives. When we hear this passage from Proverbs 8, we can begin to accurately value the bridge that brings women back to the Wisdom they were separated from by domestic and sexual violence. Because when we hear this passage from Proverbs 8, we are hearing the promise of God to be eternally present in our world.

⁴ William P. Brown, "Proverbs 8:22-31." *Interpretation* 63, no. 3 (2009), 278.

⁵ William P. Brown, "Wisdom's Wonder: Proverbs, Paideia, and Play." *The Covenant Quarterly* 68, no. 3-4 (2010), 13-14.

⁶ Brown, "Wisdom's Wonder", 13-14.