

Wisdom's Feast
O Sapientia
Second Sunday after Christmas

Sirach 24:1-12; Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21; John 1:1-5; 14-15

On this Sunday before the feast of the Epiphany (Orthodox Christmas Day), I invite us to look again at the advent hymn, *O Come O Come Emmanuel* and specifically at the second verse in the familiar translation by Henry Sloane Coffin (1916):

*O Come thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh.
To us the path of knowledge show, and cause us in her way to go.*

We sang the original Latin chant as our opening hymn. It is the first in the series of chants called the “O Antiphons,” and dates to the eighth century, C.E. (and possibly earlier). It begins with the call to Wisdom: *O Sapientia*. The United Church of Christ’s New Century Hymnal has this translation: “O Wisdom breathed from God Most High, your depths all cosmic bounds defy. Your might in gentleness holds sway; come forth and teach your prudent way.”¹ The note at the bottom of the page suggests that “Sophia,” the Greek word for Wisdom, may be used. Then Wisdom becomes personified, as it is in the poems from the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books. Back in November, Michael Dowd spent quite a bit of time illustrating the importance of “personifying” deity – creating metaphors that help us understand the various aspects of sacred creation. Listen to these personifications of Wisdom from Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon:

Sirach 24:1-12

The Praise of Wisdom

Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:

“I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway. Among all these I sought a resting-place; in whose territory should I abide?

“Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.’”

¹ United Church of Christ, 740.

“Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting-place, and in Jerusalem was my domain. I took root in an honoured people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage. I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon. I grew tall like a palm tree in En-gedi, and like rose-bushes in Jericho; like a fair olive tree in the field, and like a plane tree beside water I grew tall. Like cassia and camel’s thorn I gave forth perfume, and like choice myrrh I spread my fragrance, like galbanum, onycha, and stacte, and like the odour of incense in the tent. Like a terebinth I spread out my branches, and my branches are glorious and graceful. Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit.

“Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more. Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin.”

Proverbs 8

The Gifts of Wisdom

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge.

“Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion.

“The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly. I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me. Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity.

“My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries.”

Wisdom's Part in Creation

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 he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. 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; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.

John 1:1-5; 14-15 (Scholars Version)

The divine word and wisdom was there with God, and it was what God was. It was there with God from the beginning. Everything came to be by means of it; and without it not one thing that exists came to be. In it was life, and this life was the light of humanity. Light was shining in the darkness, and darkness did not master it.

The divine word and wisdom became human and resided among us. We have seen its glory, glory appropriate to a Father's only son, brimming with generosity and truth.

Those medieval monks were very likely onto something important when they put Wisdom first in their Advent prayers. The Scholars' translation of John's prologue tells us that “In the beginning there was the divine word and wisdom . . . and it was what God was.”² In the medieval world, the Wisdom of God was revealed through prayer, contemplation, and the natural world the people were so intimately involved with. So the monks prayed to Wisdom and asked that the path to knowledge be shown to them, and that Wisdom would help them to walk in that path.

² Funk, et al., 401.

Wisdom then led to knowledge, which led to Christ, the ultimate revelation of God, and to the salvation of souls.

In the postmodern, twenty-first century, global world, knowledge does not come from wisdom. Wisdom does not come first – as indicated by the reversal in the twentieth century form of the medieval chant. In the postmodern world, wisdom is nothing more than accumulated knowledge. The more we know, the wiser we are, and supposedly the more likely we are to act after careful thought: with “prudence” as opposed to impulse.

The good news according to John is that we always have the power to join the program.

In *The Universe Story*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry illustrate how new millennium physics teaches the wisdom at the heart of nature:

Without a sensitivity to primordial communication within the universe, the universe’s story comes to an end. That this is certainly the case with an individual organism we can readily appreciate in the case of the monarch butterfly. Climbing out of the pupal shell, stretching its wings in the drying sunlight, what other than the voices of the universe can that butterfly rely upon for guidance? It must make a journey that will cover territory filled with both dangers and possibilities, none of which has ever been experienced before. To rely on its own personal experience or knowledge would be a disaster for the butterfly. Instead it finds itself surrounded by voices of the past, of the other insects, of the wind and the rain and the leaves of the trees.

The information of the genetic material comes forth precisely within its interactions. That is, the monarch butterfly has little if any individual awareness of the difference between beneficial winds and dangerous winds until it finds itself confronted by them in reality. The winds speak to the butterfly, the taste of the water speaks to the butterfly, the shape of the leaf speaks to the butterfly and offers a guidance that resonates with the wisdom coded into the butterfly’s being. Such communication takes place beneath the level of language, even that of genetic language. It functions at the primordial reality of primal contact. The source of the guidance is both within and without. . . .

The butterfly lives in a seamless realm, a matrix, poetically in the palm of God/dess’s hand, not alien or estranged.

Is it possible for us to find that kind of confidence, or trust in the nature of the Universe itself?

Let’s take a moment or two to think about Wisdom, and our place in the Universe.

What kind of liturgy, or worship experience, would celebrate the kind of inclusive, nurturing community the butterfly knows without thinking about it?

I invite us to participate in a Communion – a Eucharist – that we might call Wisdom’s Feast. Eucharist at its root means to give thanks. Just like the monarch butterfly, who finds its way home every year by listening to the elements of the world in which it lives, or like the salmon, that returns from the sea every year, climbs the waterfalls, and lays its eggs in the rivers where the next generation continues the cycle, we can think of ourselves in connection to the universe in the same way. Matthew Fox says, “Interconnectivity is the heart of the Eucharistic experience: God and humanity coming together, God and flesh, the flesh of wheat, wine, sunshine, soil, water, human ingenuity, stars, supernovas, galaxies, storms, fireballs – every Eucharist has a 15-billion-year sacred story that renders it holy.”

Liturgy brings the people together to consider our place in the universe, to celebrate or commemorate our lives together, to become clear what our purpose is as a community, to strengthen ourselves for the task at hand, and to send ourselves out to continue our common work, transformed and in solidarity.

The following words from the prophet Isaiah and from the Wisdom literature of the Jewish tradition are an invitation to Wisdom’s Feast, to Communion: To celebration of the certainty of God’s love and protection – exactly what the Butterfly experiences as it finds its way to its breeding grounds high in the mountains of Colorado.

Institution

One: Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, “You that are simple, turn in here!”

To those without sense she says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and those who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without price, for our God calls us away from oppression and greed to a realm of justice and love [pour wine].

Wisdom orders all things well: First the grain, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear [break bread].

Wisdom has set her table. She calls from the highest places, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Come, for all has been made ready.”