

Why Do We Need a Savior? O Wisdom!
Proverbs 8:22-36
Matthew 25:1-13

“The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”
Isaiah 11:2

“Why do we need a savior?” you ask. Is it that we are broken and need fixing? Is it that we are lost on a cliff and need rescuing? Is it that we have sinned and need forgiving? Is it that we are restless and cannot rest until we rest in God? All of these possible reasons for needing a savior presume that you and I need to be saved from the beings we have become. Or you could say instead that a savior was part of the plot from the dawn of creation: say that in the fullness of time God planned to send the Son in order to redeem the relationship we originally refused in the garden. Here the claim is that you were created for the God who is on his way to you, even now, to save you from life without him.

But I also found myself turning your question around to ask: What sort of God would bother to save or fix or find or rescue creatures like us? Certainly not the gods of mythology that cavorted with each other in the heavens and made sport of mere mortals. Certainly not the gods of nature that were thought to be behind all that threatens and befalls human history, the thing we call fate. What can we say of the sort of God who would love and therefore save a wretch like me?

Thanks to your question, we will spend this season headed toward the intersection of the human condition and the divine initiative that is love met in a manger. On the one hand, with the words of the ancient O Antiphons, we will cry out of our need to the winter darkness. On the other hand, we will name the One whose nature it is to come to us. We begin this morning beseeching the heavens to send a savior who will reveal the way of wisdom and understanding.

We begin by calling upon Wisdom to teach us the way of truth.

Wisdom is not a name we use for God very often because most of the time you and I spend our Sunday mornings wandering around in a story about the God who is actively involved in human history. The plot goes something like this: "...God chose a particular people, fought on their behalf, issued legal codes, sent angels to maintain contact with humans, called prophets, enlisted foreign powers to discipline the chosen race, and promised to bestow a new covenant on inveterate sinners for the sake of God's honor...." According to my Old Testament Professor James Crenshaw, this story "represents one way of looking at the human situation," a way that is somewhat alien to what is known in Scripture as the Writings.

Job, many of the psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and the Song of Solomon—the Wisdom tradition--came into being for two reasons that I think we can understand. The first had to do with evidence. In their exile and soon after their return, less and less could Israel find evidence in their history to support the claim that God was in control. Their loss of the land, the monarchy and the First Temple caused them to question God's presence and favor. In order to make sense, now the story turned on a people's sin and God's punishment. But maybe this was not necessarily so! The second reason for the Wisdom tradition had to do with tolerance. Given the pluralistic setting of Babylon in the years of their exile and even as they returned to a land ruled by alien powers, being God's singularly chosen people had become problematic.

But even more worrisome was Israel's inability to discern God's word from all the other words in the culture. One prophet had told them to stay and fight Nebuchadrezzar while another prophet, namely Jeremiah, had counseled them to cut and run. Both claimed to be speaking God's word. Again according to Crenshaw, "In such a situation the people found it necessary to put an end to this form of communication between God and humans. Thus they discredited

prophecy and silenced God's voice." Still, they could not live without some living conversation with the God who made them.

Enter the sages whose take on the relationship between God and human beings was altogether different. The sages believed that revelation, the disclosure of God's person and purpose and will, happened at the moment of creation. "Truth was planted within the universe, and human beings searched diligently for it by using their intelligence. Still truth was not disinterested; in some mysterious fashion divine mystery declared itself to the inquiring mind." The voice of God's wisdom called out from the things God created and was heard by sages who were not so much concerned with institutional religion, says Old Testament scholar R.B.Y Scott, as with "life in the secular world and the day-to-day problems of the ordinary [person] who is content to leave traditional theology to the experts."

Furthermore the voice of Wisdom generated desire among human beings—a hunger and thirst for knowledge. The desired knowledge was located in the five books of the Torah, the Word of God, with which Wisdom was identified and was characterized by five words similar to the words in our text from Isaiah: wisdom, understanding, instruction, knowledge and counsel.

According to one school of sages, the relationship of human beings to this knowledge knows no bounds. Every person is made to seek wisdom and nothing in all of creation is alien to wisdom. "Every encounter" Crenshaw says, "afford[s] a bridge into the transcendent realm. The slightest act by an insect, or the behavior of humans, concealed [knowledge and wisdom] worthy of discovery." I remind you again how contrary this is to the story in which God takes the initiative to be known to a particular people in mighty acts throughout human history whereas these sages held that "everyone could make contact with transcendent reality, regardless of their historical situation." No real need for outside help or something like a Savior.

But according to another school of sages, those who gave us Job and Ecclesiastes, wisdom is not to be found by the likes of you and me. It is elusive and hidden. According to the preacher in Ecclesiastes, God has fixed things so that wisdom can never be discovered. According to Job, his friends cannot give him wisdom and understanding because wisdom lies with the God who created the heavens and the earth. “Where does wisdom come from? Where is the place of understanding?” Job asks because the meaning of the world and his life are not available *in* the world to be worked out by him; he does not know the way to it. Wisdom “is precisely a voice calling *to* us,” according to Robert Jenson, that is not our own.

So here is where things get really interesting! The voice of wisdom is personified in Proverbs and in Sirach as a woman whose speeches are in “the exact style of divine self-revelation.” Yet her voice is neither God’s voice nor is it the voice of some intermediary. It is a voice among us that speaks to reveal the meaning of human existence in relation to the God who made us. In Scripture, the voice issues from a mysterious presence that was there when the world was created, and is here to address human beings who would otherwise be utterly lost, and so speaks for God though she is not God.

“Who is this creature?” asks Jenson. We are now approaching angels dancing on the head of a pin! Wisdom, says Jenson if I am understanding him at all, is the Word of God in creation before the Word became flesh. I think it not by chance that the voice of Lady Wisdom was central to the fourth century debate between Arius and Athanasius about the nature of Christ. When she said, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago” in Proverbs and in Sirach says, “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High” as the choir will soon sing, her words prompted the writers of our earliest creeds to ask after Jesus: was he created like us and therefore merely a good human being or do we, in an only begotten Son, have to do

with God?

But the next chapter of Proverbs is equally provocative for those who read Scripture through the Word that became flesh. Lady Wisdom invites young maidens to “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.” Likewise a foolish woman “sits at the door of her house...calling to [the same maidens]...” and invites them in to drink her sweet water and eat bread in secret. The dead are at her table, says Lady Wisdom, and her guests dwell in the depths of Sheol.

The ninth of Proverbs, of course, sent me to the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens, both stories ominously suggesting that we will either be those who accept the invitation to the table set for life or we will be those seated unwittingly in the darkness at the table set for death. In either case, our destiny depends upon wisdom. Therefore Matthew begins with wise men from the East and majors in Jesus the sage, the Teacher, the Wisdom of God who will be vindicated by her deeds.

No doubt Matthew wrote to a generation like the generation in exile, a generation that had begun to grow weary of waiting for Christ’s return: a generation like ours in need of a word in the meantime that spoke to them in the marketplace, a word that anchored their everyday lives, a word that taught them how to live while they waited. As James Crenshaw notes in the last place, wisdom’s legacy in the Hebrew Scriptures was that it enabled people to cope.

All of this leads me to believe that our cry for wisdom is not a cry out of ignorance so much as it is a cry of loneliness; a cry spoken against the deafening silence created by creatures whose own voice of reason has rendered creation mute; a cry of those unable to cope any longer in a world with no Word of God’s person or purpose or will. For we too have silenced the prophets; we have also quit the voice calling to us from creation and now speak only to ourselves

and of ourselves. Unless it should come to pass that the Wisdom which proceeded from the mouth of the Most High should break through the silence and become flesh and speak to us.

“The condition of [our] relation to God” proclaimed Paul Tillich, “is first of all one of *not* having, *not* seeing, *not* knowing,...*not grasping*....It is not easy to endure this not having God,” he says, “this waiting for God....” Therefore “we live not by the few answers which we know how to give to the question of our existence, but by the quest for a wholly different answer, for the answer which God alone can give....There is not a moment in time,” says Karl Barth, “that, in its finiteness and limitations, does not cry out for eternity.” Cry then around this table set for life on this first Sunday of the season of waiting, cry into the winter’s darkness: *O Come thou Wisdom from on high, who orders all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go.*