

Sophia, the Wisdom of God

12/24/2023

Scripture 1: (Prov. 9:1-18 ESV)

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight."

Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it.

The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way,

"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" And to him who lacks sense she says, "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Scripture 2: (1 Cor. 1:18-25 ESV)

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Sermon:

This Advent season we have spent our time talking about several different Ladies within Scripture all of whom have exemplified an aspect of our redemption: hope, peace, love, and joy. This morning we spoke about a “Lady” who is not actually a Lady, but is a whole body of people: the *ekklesia*, the Church. Tonight, we will consider one final Lady and *part* of her relationship to Jesus Christ. A Lady who, like this morning, is also not actually a Lady. Although she is often easily forgotten, it is said that this Lady is the most sought after and the most desired of women, yet she seems to be found by fewer and fewer people. This Lady is named *Sophia*, the Greek word for Wisdom.

She is often considered as the star of the book of Proverbs. Meanwhile, her personification and characterization is emphasized throughout extra-Biblical Jewish mysticism and in other Second Temple Jewish philosophies and writings. Throughout Proverbs, she is contrasted against the lady named Folly, firmly establishing a dichotomy between: Folly, wickedness, and sinfulness against Wisdom, righteousness, and godliness; between those who belong to God and those who belong to the world and to Satan.

While both Wisdom and Folly call out to every person, “*Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!*”, Folly encourages them to follow in the world's wicked ways, while Wisdom encourages them to walk in righteousness before God, ways which seem counter-intuitive against the seductive, reasonable-seeming entreaties of Folly.

Although Wisdom is not a true person, we are told certain things about her in Scripture that are helpful for us to remember and consider in such a time as this, at Christmas.

- “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*”
 - Wisdom is having “*the fear of the LORD*”, which means to honor and revere God.
 - Insight means for us to have understanding; “*knowledge of the Holy One*” means that we know and are known by Christ, that we recognize His works and why He has done all that He has done.
 - So, by knowing Jesus, we receive understanding through the power of His Holy Spirit, which then inclines our hearts to honor, revere and worship the LORD, in Spirit and Truth; thus the Christian receives and has true wisdom.

That is what is so glorious about the mystery of the Incarnation. The Christ-child was born in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago; Jesus, the son of Mary, was born and came as the fullness of God's self-revelation to His creation.

- First, God gifted all of creation to us and then, God gifted Himself to us, to serve us as our Savior.

This is why the “*wisdom of God*” is “*folly to those who are perishing*”, because throughout human history and within every other religion mankind is created for the principal purpose of serving the divine; the divine is never imagined to serve the mundane.

According to the world around us, Christmas is God's greatest act of foolishness. They believe that what we celebrate every year on this night, the Incarnation of God the Son as God's “Christmas gift” to us, is even more foolish than celebrating Jesus's Death and His Resurrection. The world just cannot believe it. The world does not want to believe it, because it is so very simple and because the world trusts Folly rather than Sophia.

Jesus's sinless life and the fact of His moral teachings are no longer being denied because there is just too much evidence for their effectiveness, and for their truth. So that now, the only thing which they can consider more foolish than the sacrificial, atoning Death and Resurrection of God is, the Birth of God.

People argue against the necessity of the Cross and the Empty Tomb, because they think that those are the weak points in our faith, yet they refuse to engage with the Incarnation because they cannot even imagine God as a tiny child, an infant; as a bouncing baby, human boy. It is too Crazy!; too Inconceivable!; too much Foolishness!; because it is God's Wisdom. The wisdom of God always appears foolish to the wise and the eyes of the world.

Just think about the whole “Reason for the Season” from an earthly, worldly, human perspective; the why for which Jesus was born: the forgiveness of our sins.

That perspective says, “If God is so big, great, powerful, and loving then why can't He (why doesn't He) just snap His divine fingers, or speak a divine command and immediately, totally, and completely forgive our sins against Him and against one another?”, but they are asking the wrong question.

Consider a shopkeeper whose store gets robbed:

- If the perpetrator is caught, and before he is convicted, the shopkeeper goes before the court and says, “I forgive this person. Please drop the charges and release them.”. Although the shopkeeper is being merciful by forgiving them, he is not being just or righteous because he is still suffering the injustice of the theft. Thus neither person gets what they deserve and both person are worse off for it.
- Or, on the other hand, if the perpetrator is caught, convicted, and sentenced to prison for a time, and is also commanded to repay the value of what was stolen and then, after his debt is paid, he says “I forgive this person.”, the shopkeeper would be considered just. It would all be fair {so long as the sentence suits the crime} and righteous, but there would not be any mercy. Thus both persons would get what they deserve, yet still neither person is better off for it.

It is certain that by human effort alone, justice and mercy cannot coexist together. We cannot be both perfectly just and perfectly merciful because we are not God. We cannot be both 100% just and also be 100% merciful at the same time; we can only try to balance the two, within our own finite capacities.

Therefore God, who is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful, cannot merely “forgive and forget” us without also having the debt incurred by our sins satisfied, because while that would be merciful it would also be unjust. Only something crazy in the eyes of the world could solve this dilemma.

A third party is required in order for mercy to be shown and for justice to be satisfied. This is why we need a substitute. This is why the Incarnation was necessary, because if we hope to receive mercy, then someone else must suffer the justice due me.

We need an innocent party, deserving of mercy, who is our willing substitute to trade their deserved mercy for our deserved punishment; justifying us with their own righteousness, while also suffering the condemnation of our wickedness.

We need a man, a human person like us, to take our place and we need the only Holy God: Himself undeserving of condemnation; to be a suitable substitute.

We need a man to suffer a human's punishment and we need the infinite God to suffer the fullness of God's just wrath.

Therefore, we needed a God-man. We need the Incarnation. We need Jesus the Christ, God the Son.

But how could God offer Himself as a substitute for a human person?

Only through addition: by taking humanity upon Himself as well; to become both fully God and fully human and thus demonstrate the greatness of His love for us. *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die--but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Rom. 5:7-8 ESV)

What foolishness! Is God not transcendent? Is He not far above and so much greater than us mere humans? What kind of a God would willingly choose to “lessen” Himself, by becoming mortal, and choose to allow Himself to die? That is what all the “wisdom of the wise” asks.

Back in the 1st Century AD, their “modern philosophies” held that spiritual things were superior to physical things. People's religious goals were to escape their present reality, their present world; to become intangible and detached from everything and everyone around them. Yet now, what do people think today? Are people more focused upon the world around them or are we constantly seeking new ways to escape or deny reality with drugs and alcohol, or fantasies of every variety? Our world is not so very different; our problems are not so very different, therefore we still need the same solution: the wisdom of God instead of the foolishness of men.

This then is the true “*wisdom of God*” which we celebrate tonight when we remember the Incarnation, *“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Phil. 2:6-11 ESV). What the world believes was subtraction: a lessening of divinity by the assumption of humanity; is actually addition according to the wisdom of God. Adding a human nature to the divine nature of God the Son did not lessen Him, it actually increased Him.

The birth of Christ is utter foolishness to the wise of the world, to “*those who are perishing*”, but to those who are “simple” like us, the Incarnation is the lifeline of our Hope for God's Peace, the receipt of His Love, and the fullness of His Joy as we are united to Him as the Bride of Christ, the Church.

So this Christmas, because you have become truly wise and because you know Christ, when you exchange presents with your family and friends, I urge you to pause and remember the cost of your salvation, which was purchased with the freely shed blood of God the Son, and then glorify the LORD for all that He has done for you and thus gladly cling to your foolish hope in Christ.

AMEN