

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
Sirach 24:1-12
January 5, 2014

“Wisdom Praises Herself”

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

A New Year! And a new, surprising reading for today....a passage that is, I would suspect, unfamiliar to most of you!

The lectionary—that calendar of readings that gives us the “assigned” text for the day—offers us something new and unexpected for today!

A New Year, a new reading, a new way to understand and experience God!

Today’s reading is from the Book of Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus. Sirach is not found in the Old Testament, nor is it found in the New Testament. But it IS found in the Bible. That sounds like a riddle, but it’s not.

The Book of Sirach is part of the Apocrypha—it is one of the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books of the Bible.

The what?

The word “apocrypha” means “things hidden away.” The Apocrypha refers to the books found literally between the Old and New Testaments—in their own middle section of the Bible. Deuterocanonical is a term used in Roman Catholic writing that refers to the Apocrypha.

Today the Book of Sirach from the Apocrypha makes one of its rare appearances in the lectionary. This is an unusual challenge, and an unusual treat: on this first Sunday in the New Year, we will be reflecting on one of the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books of the Bible.

Why doesn’t the lectionary give us readings from the Apocrypha more often?

Well, Protestants consider the books in the Apocrypha to be outside the accepted canon of sacred writings. The legitimacy of these books as part of the canon has been questioned for centuries because these writings were originally only found in the Greek Old Testament—no Hebrew version of these texts was ever found.

The early church, which used the Greek Old Testament, embraced these books as part of their sacred writings—early Christians not only read these books, but used them in teaching and quoted them as Scripture.

The books in the Apocrypha were considered Scripture for well over a millennium. But that changed with the Protestant Reformation of 1517. The Reformation was based on reasserting the authority of Scripture, therefore it was extremely important for the reformers to delineate exactly what was Scripture and what was not.

During the Reformation, Protestants rejected the books of the Apocrypha as lacking divine authority. Martin Luther called the Apocrypha “useful and good for reading,” but he did not consider the books in the Apocrypha as equivalent to Holy Scripture. Consequently, after the Reformation, Protestants either completely excised the books of the Apocrypha from the Bible, or collected these texts in the middle of the Bible—creating a third section of the Bible. Because most of the books of the Apocrypha were written between 200 BCE and 100 CE, it was argued that they literally belonged “between the testaments.”

However, throughout history the Catholic Church has not agreed with Protestants about the legitimacy of the Apocrypha. In 1546, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent declared that the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books were indeed divine. From then on, right up through today, the Roman Catholic Church has maintained that the books of the Apocrypha (which the Catholic Church calls the Deuterocanon, or second canon) are a legitimate part of Scripture.

Today, some Christians believe that the books of the Apocrypha are Scriptural, some Christians believe they are not because they were not found in the original Hebrew Scriptures. But regardless of how one considers the Apocrypha, it cannot be disputed that the writings contain important lessons which—as many Christians throughout the ages have discovered—are helpful to our growth as people of faith.

The Book of Sirach, written in Jerusalem about 180 BCE, is an especially exciting component of the Apocrypha, full of powerful imagery and vitality. The book discusses ethics in public life, virtue as a measure of character, and the study of Torah and its importance in worship.

Our reading for today from Sirach is a particularly striking poetic first-person speech by none other than Lady Wisdom. The poem is elegant, compelling and provocative.

We meet Lady Wisdom as she is praising herself and telling of her glory. She is portrayed as an active, intentional, relational entity—not as an abstraction.

Wisdom does not engage in false modesty. She is glorious and she knows it. She also knows where both her and her glory come from. When the mouth of the Most High opened in the act of creation, she came out like a mist that covered the earth. Wisdom, this female entity, is closely tied to the Father God, and her name in Greek is “Sophia.” While she does not say she is God’s first work of art, she suggests it with her beautifully tactile language.

Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson says “Sophia is a female personification of God’s own being in creative and saving involvement in the world.”

Sophia is a confident, assertive, vocal entity, sure of her position and importance. But her relationship with God is complex and confusing. She is both of God and with God. She appears to be atemporal (created by God before time) and will endure, like God, for all time.

Wisdom seems to be God’s instrument of both creation and of redemption. She is portrayed as proud, sassy and boastful—praising herself for her influence and God’s confidence in her. It appears that in Sophia we have a deity with an attitude.

By coming from the “mouth of the Most High,” Wisdom identifies herself with God’s word and breath. She is like a mist that surrounds, pervades and penetrates the earth providing nourishment and life.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Telling her own birth story, Wisdom says she lived in the sky for a quite some time, enthroned in a pillar of cloud all by herself. She went anywhere she wanted to go, from the highest heaven to the deepest abyss. Oceans were no impediment for her; she traveled over waves as easily as she did over land. She held a universal passport, moving freely over every people and nation without being possessed by any of them.”

But, in all her wanderings, Sophia was looking for something. She was seeking a resting place on earth. She longed for a place to settle, a place to belong. Wisdom wanted a place to be on the earth, of the earth, with her people. She gave up the sky for dry, firm ground, and, with God’s guidance, chose Jerusalem as her resting place. Sophia took root in a place, among an honored people.

Listen again the words of Wisdom, Sophia, as we meet her in the Book of Sirach:

- Wisdom praises herself,
and tells of her glory in the midst of her people.*
- ² *In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,
and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:*
- ³ *'I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
and covered the earth like a mist.*
- ⁴ *I dwelt in the highest heavens,
and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.*
- ⁵ *Alone I compassed the vault of heaven
and traversed the depths of the abyss.*
- ⁶ *Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,
and over every people and nation I have held sway.*
- ⁷ *Among all these I sought a resting-place;
in whose territory should I abide?*
- ⁸ *'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."*
- ⁹ *Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.*
- ¹⁰ *In the holy tent I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion.*
- ¹¹ *Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting-place,
and in Jerusalem was my domain.*
- ¹² *I took root in an honored people,
in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.*

I do not know what your reaction is to the female personification of Wisdom in the Apocrypha, but I am very drawn to the wild and wonderful Sophia. With God portrayed as a male figure throughout the Bible and so many high profile men found in Scripture, it is refreshing to find Sophia in the Book of Sirach.

After a countless number of HE HE HE HE when describing God and having the prominent male figures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Saul, Solomon, Elijah, Noah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Paul and of course Jesus and the twelve shape our faith, it is a joy to discover the beautiful, vocal, powerful female figure Sophia said to be present at creation.

Although we are taught that as human beings we are all created equally in the image of God, Jewish and Christian thought has not always treated women as equal to men in our created state. The disparity between the power attributed to men over women, the prominence of men in Scripture, and the relentless use of male pronouns for God have made it a challenge for women to hold on to the teaching that we are all created equally in the image of God.

Although the Bible contains the moving stories about Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Mary and Mary Magdalene, there are scores of other women who are unnamed in Scripture although they played central roles in promoting God's work in the world. Women matter to God as agents of justice, liberation and mercy. And we long to have God manifest Godself in feminine form.

Yet, even though I rejoice that Sophia is proud, powerful and present in the Deuterocanonical books of the Bible, I also do not want to get stuck on the gender of God or of Wisdom. Because so many female clergy insist, emphatically, that God is NOT MALE, we cannot then claim that Wisdom **is female!** Both are wrong because God and Wisdom are genderless—they are beyond time, beyond form, and beyond gender.

So if we get hot under the collar exclaiming PLEASE USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE—God is NOT male, do not just use male pronouns, we cannot do cartwheels of joy claiming that Wisdom is female.

Theologian Sallie McFague reminds us that all language about God is metaphorical. Language says something about what God is like, but LANGUAGE CAN NEVER CAPTURE THE ESSENCE GOD.

We may rejoice that we have found and delight in the sassy Sophia, but we must remember that when speaking about God, Wisdom, and all things divine, language is always inadequate. God and Wisdom are beyond human language. They are too big for human language, they cannot be reduced to fit in human language.

And so we try to refer to divinity with words that expand rather than shrink God. Rather than God the Father, we may say “Holy One.” Paul Tillich referred to God as “Ground of Being.” Joyce Rupp refers to God as “Transforming Presence,” and also “Trusted Guide.” William Cleary calls God “Creating Spirit.”

Although I long to balance all the male references to God with an equal number of female images and pronouns, I am trying not to get stuck on the words used to name or describe God because I fear that doing so runs the risk of idolatry. I worry that in obsessing about what to call God, we can mistake the words, descriptions, and metaphors for God's self. Then we have either reduced God to our limited language, or lost God in a flurry of words.

My hope is that simple, varied and expansive terms for a divine energy that appears as a burning bush, as whirlwind, and as the voice of Wisdom can help us connect more deeply and broadly with the source of our strength, love, beauty, grace and courage.

Thank be to God—in all his and her holy mystery.

Amen.

DO NOT COPY