

## Hidden in Plain Sight

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Proverbs 8:22-34, Wisdom of Solomon 7:25—8:1, John 14:8-21, 27 (all read from The Inclusive Bible)

An eon ago I went to Luther Seminary. I was around 38 years old? A little closer to spring than this, I was asked to preach my first sermon at a lunchtime Lenten service here, in Hope's chapel. The focus was on the Gospel of Mark's cryptic crucifixion story and I got Mark 15:40-41:

“There were also women looking on from a distance, among them Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.”

I realized with some shock; these women at the cross that I'd never noticed before were Jesus' disciples. Disciples in those days paid their tuition for a philosophical education by providing for the teacher. Those women had always been there in plain sight; but the lenses I had once learned to read the Bible with hid them.

Although the Bible was important for revealing Jesus, I thought the Bible was culturally backward and patriarchal and misogynistic throughout. I thought as a modern woman I had to somehow identify with powerful male heroes in the Bible in order to see myself in it—and that was hard.

I thought the Old Testament in particular must be irrelevant to the experience of being female, and probably untrustworthy for Christian faith as well. Then I took a course in Old Testament. And one in Wisdom literature.

The Old Testament is chock full of women who claim and live out the promises of God for themselves and their children and their nation in surprising ways. It is for some, a textbook for resistance in a patriarchal society. One way that shows up is in the figure—not human—I want us to notice today. Hokmah, translated from Hebrew as “Woman Wisdom.” Lutherans don't learn much about her, because much of her radiance appears in books that didn't make it into our Bible and lectionary, although they are part of Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican Bibles. She appears in some Psalms, in Job and Ecclesiastes, but it is in Proverbs that she speaks for herself. In Greek, the common language of the Scriptures in Jesus' time, she was called Sophia.

In Proverbs 8, Wisdom/Sophia tells us who she is: born even before the primordial deep in Genesis 1, already there when Yahweh established the heavens and the earth and the boundaries of the seas, beside God in the process and organization of creation as a crafter and artisan. The female pronouns are not mere grammatical ciphers. She is unmistakably a female figure.

The phrase “skilled artisan” in the confusing way the Hebrew language works can also mean “nursling child,” and Wisdom's way in the relationship of God and creation is the

way of play and rejoicing and delight. God delights in her and she “double-delights” in creation—a plural of emphasis that makes me think of the way my 1 year old grandson laughs and throws himself into the movement when I play “tick-tock” with him.

What else does Wisdom do? She walks around the city, calling to the people she loves to come to her table. She sends out her servants with invitations to her abundant feast of bread and wine. Her whole heart is hospitality. Her teaching is offered freely to those who are not powerful or wise. She teaches in short stories that point to the natural world and ask her disciples to imagine the implications for their own life. She offers true wealth, long life, rest for the soul, light for the mind, life abundant, and happiness. Just listen, she says. She gives instruction, Torah, as a light in the heart, the location of courage and will and purpose in the Bible’s spiritual anatomy.

Wisdom of Solomon, one of those books in other Bibles, credits Sophia with instructing its author in the knowledge of all things and then sings a hymn of praise to her. It’s characteristic of Wisdom’s stories that she points to things in the world, such as trees by the water, flowers of the fields, the sun and stars, the habits of human beings and invites us to learn from the ways of Creation. But her powers go beyond illumination of nature. Wisdom is brighter, more subtle, more agile than any of these things; purer and fairer than the sun and moon and stars. More important still, she makes people friends—not servants or disciples, but friends—with God, and brings eternal life by slipping into their souls and dwelling in them.

Suddenly, Wisdom/Sophia is not so unfamiliar!

The New Testament writers from Matthew to John, from Paul to Peter to whoever it was wrote Colossians, recognized this person in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus shows up as embodiment of Wisdom, from the parables he proclaims, “Consider the lilies,” “heaven is like a mustard seed,” “who hides their lamp under a basket?” to the miracles of power over storms and feeding thousands to his delight in people whom others despise. But most vividly, we see Jesus/Sophia in the Gospel of John: beside God before Creation, coming into the world as its light, teaching of himself as the bread from heaven, living water, the true vine, the resurrection and life.

As he nears the Cross, his disciple/friends with him, he instructs them in plain words that “Abba God is in me and I am in Abba God,” Still, they find it incredible. They can’t see it. Even more incredibly, he tells them that those who believe in him will do greater works than he does because they too, through him, are in Abba God. The disciples struggle to grasp this reality, that they are one with the Wisdom of God. Jesus promises the shalom, peace, abundance, and double-delight of God to them and to us, dwelling in us. I struggle to see it too. But Jesus declares it before he goes to the cross: in God, Jesus makes his followers friends with God, because Jesus is in them and they in him. And we, Jesus’ friends, will do greater things than he has done because we are all immanent, in one another, God, Wisdom, and Friends. Greater things than Jesus? Imagine! What could they be?

First and second century churches recognized the feminine divine image of God, Sophia, in Jesus; Wisdom as Sophia appears in first and second century writings that deliberate about the Trinity and our liturgy. Women held important leadership positions in the church, including deacons and bishops and missionary preachers, inspired by the light of Sophia. Sally Douglas recounts how those congregations experienced Jesus as Woman Wisdom in their life together: as the Radiant imparter of divine knowledge, as the divine sufferer on the cross who returned not to punish but to heal and teach, as savior imparting a transformed life with others now, as friend-maker with God, and as Giver of the divine feast. Is Sophia hidden in Jesus? Or in plain sight?

Wisdom is a feminine face of God and Jesus is God's Wisdom. We can see them differently in unity, a non-binary identity. Remember that image of Jesus on our patio? A woman was the model for it. Wisdom makes people friends with God and we are Jesus' friends, embraced in that identity. We worship one who delighted in us at Creation, who is the light that shines in us. Jesus/Sophia invites us to share in lighting up the world, all of our faces of God shining more magnificently than the stars. They set for us an edgeless table of friends of God that is a playful pluriformity of delight without end.

A preacher is supposed to look for the Good News and shine a light on it. In the bleak midwinter, what could be brighter news than this?