

Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31

*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.*

*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.*

Psalm 8

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

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Your Vision of God

I only expected to visit his church once – a quick stop in to say hello to the minister and his family, newly arrived from out of town. We'd known each other earlier, in a different city, when we were both young couples without children. We'd gotten together socially, but I'd never heard him preach.

So I was astounded when I heard the minister's message that morning. He talked of a God who "delighted in us." *Delighted* in us?

That was a radical departure for me. My God was a God whose love I could earn, *if* I worked hard for justice. If I fed the poor, and cared for those in need. But a God who delighted in me, before I did anything? That God seemed too extravagant, too frivolous. I was a parsimonious New England Yankee!

Yet that sermon, about a God who delighted in me –began the most important turn in my spiritual life that I've ever had. It changed everything.

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The Image we have of God matters. It "functions" in our life – shaping how we think of od, of ourselves, and of each other.¹

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In my own life, after hearing about a God who delights in me – and in you – I slowly began to explore that possibility. Of a God who finds us humans amazingly wonderful, astonishing creatures – the same way we can marvel at the smallest flower blooming at the top of a mountain, or the common weeds by the side of a

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson: [She Who Is, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse](#) (Crossroad, NY) 1995. Johnson's point is broader. She says our image of God shapes not only these things, but even our sense of what community should look like, and how we order government.

road, when we pause long enough to look closely. Have you done that: squatted down to study the petals of a dandelion, the tiny hairs of yellow making up its center, the overlapping pedals radiating out, the serrated edges of its green leaves. It's amazing, really!

We sang it this morning: "All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small....". Don't you marvel, as spring unfolds in New England, wave after wave of magnolia and apple blossoms, of daffodils and tulips, of azaleas, and lilacs and now the rhododendrons?

The Psalmist today marvels at nature, God's majestic display: "the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established." In light of God's capacity to create this splendor, the psalmist asks, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" That You -- God -- even notice us? But "You have made us only a little less than You," O God of Gods, sings the astonished psalmist, "crowning us with glory and honor." God seems to delight in us, granting us wisdom and power.

How can it be? How can it be?

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Yet of all our bible passages today, it is the text from Proverbs, read by Todd Lee this morning, that most directly names a divine delight in us humans. Wisdom stands in the public places and cries out to be heard. She shouts from atop the highest spots, declaring that She is one to whom we should listen. "I was there at Creation," trumpets Wisdom, establishing her *bona fides*; the Lord made me at the beginning of his work; I was beside him like "a master worker," "*rejoicing* in God's inhabited world and *delighting* in the human race!"

Rejoicing about us. *Delighting* in the human race!

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If you, like me, were not familiar with this imagery, there are several reasons.

First, you need to know that the biblical character who speaks the words in Proverbs is Woman Wisdom –in the original Hebrew "Hokmah," and in the Greek, "Sophia." Both are feminine names, and Sophia Wisdom is clearly a female character. It is she –Sophia Wisdom – who says She delights in us.

Second, however, Sophia Wisdom is not easily found in many of our Bibles today. She is briefly referenced in the book of Job, and in parts of Proverbs, including today's passage. But the main Bible books in which we learn the most about Sophia Wisdom are books that Martin Luther relegated to the Apocrypha in the 1600s, reasoning that they were important, but not as important as the rest of the Canon of scriptures.

Therefore we have a split. The Wisdom books have always been part of the Hebrew Bible, read by Jews, and the Wisdom Books are still part of the Christian bible read by Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches. But Protestants rarely see them. In all the bibles in my house growing up, and there were many, most of the Wisdom books had been excluded. I never heard of Sophia Wisdom until I got to Seminary.

Third, if we only learn about Sophia Wisdom in Proverbs, we could debate about whether She is simply a divine attribute of God – God's Wisdom; whether She is a separate character, a co-creator with God; whether she is a female consort to God; or whether she is God herself, God in a female form. When the Apocryphal books are included, then Sophia Wisdom is described in terms we usually apply to the male God:

In "The Wisdom of Solomon," one of the Apocryphal books, Sophia Wisdom is introduced as "a breath of the power of God," and "a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty." Sophia is "a reflection of eternal light," "a spotless mirror of the working of God," and an "image of his goodness...." Sophia Wisdom can "do all things...she renews all things...in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets..." There is in Her a spirit that is "intelligent, holy,...invulnerable, loving the good...steadfast, sure, free from anxiety..." And it is Wisdom Sophia who led the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised land.

It must have been based on these understandings that the famous 4th Century Church Father Augustine equated Jesus with Sophia incarnate. And why the famous church named Hagia Sophia – Holy Wisdom - was built in Constantinople/Istanbul as the very seat of Orthodox Christianity. It was based on these understandings of Sophia as the Holy One.

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Now tell me, does any of this matter to you? Does it matter whether God is known to you in an image that is feminine or masculine? As Our Father, or as Sophia Wisdom? As someone who is a king to rule over you or a friend? God as a Judge or as co-creator with you? God as a Rock or as the exquisite beauty of a physics equation, as a member here recently told me?

And if matters to you, why does it? How does the image of God that you hold in your mind, change how you see yourself, and see others? Does it alter what you will do today or tomorrow? How you will awake tomorrow morning, or how you will drift to sleep tonight? How you will treat others?

Could it?

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We know, or course, that *no* words can ever capture God. God is beyond all of our feeble descriptors.

But still, we humans try to give some name to it all, whether the three letters G-O-D or other metaphors. What we do – all that we *can* do – is use words that “*point toward it,*” though never reach it.²

Why then, did the words matter *so much to me* when my friend preached, years ago? Why did I react so strongly to the new image of a God who delights in me?

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The best I can say now is that I had not realized what a burden I was staggering under; a burden I must have recognized, however unconsciously, that I would never meet. But I kept trying, most days, to love God in the way I thought I needed to – serving God by serving others. There *was* satisfaction in it. But underneath it all, there was deep anxiety, too. Because my service to God was actually made in the hopes that I would earn God's love. That I'd make myself lovable to God, based on how well I served others.

But what if I failed?

My image of God made my life exhausting. In some ways, I was like a tired toddler, just wanting to be picked up and held. Sadly, in ways not so different than a tired child, sometimes I acted out with both sadness and anger, especially when someone made me feel—either at work or at home –that whatever I did would never be good enough. That was a trigger for me.

Then I was shown a God who wanted not only to pick me up, but who actually would run towards me and swoop me up, and then, with a great chuckle hold me over Her head, my little legs dangling the air, and make me laugh! A God who delighted in me.

To use a more adult metaphor, I felt like I had now had a firm foundation on which I could build a life. God's love for me was solid and sure. It didn't need first to be earned. I would still work for justice, but now out of a deep gratitude for God's love, already mine.

Now service to others was not premised on my need to get something *from* God. I could freely give, as I had already freely received. So *I also* could be delighted when I got to give love away. I didn't need to get something back.

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² Johnson at 113.

What is your image of God? Where did it come from? What work – for good or ill – is it doing for you?

This is my pledge to you – examining your image of God is worthy of your time. There are many images of God in the Bible – as fire or wind, shepherd or mother hen gathering in her chicks. There is God as the Strong King of whom we just sang, or intimate lover in The Song of Songs. God as breath or protector – and the list goes on, because no one image could ever capture God.

Your image of God may be rooted, as mine was, in my childhood – in something intentionally, or wholly unintentionally passed on to me. It had a role to play, but the image may be outdated now for your adult life now, even unhelpful or destructive for your life today, for your *flourishing* today.

I am not blithely proposing God as solely our projection of what we want or need. In my experience, God cannot be squashed into a little box of your making, and should you try, God will break forth again in some new place in your life.

But I am urging us to be open to receiving whatever it is God – or your name for God – wishes to gift to you now; being open to engaging with the parts of ourselves we don't understand. Consider a practice of careful, thoughtful, prayerful and *gentle* wondering about your image of God. About what your deepest fears and worries are, and whether the image of God that you hold now allays or exacerbates those fears, calms or heightens those worries.

It may be that God has a whole new language to be created, or ancient words that may take on fresh life, so that together -- you with God *flourish*. So that you flower splendidly in *your* hues, so you sing with full voice in *your* key, so you paint with *your* brushes and strokes, all of your astonishing parts of this Creation, mirroring God in your way.

Why ever not?

We can meditate on this separately, and then together – Church at its very best, exploring God in our lives. The church we need in this season of our lives, 2013, gathering for wisdom and courage.

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Let me close, on this Memorial Day weekend, with a comment about the 33,000 American flags planted on the Boston Common, just beyond the King's Chapel Parish House, representing all the soldiers from this state who have died in conflict since the Civil War.

If you have not seen them, I urge you to walk past there today or tomorrow.

Everyone who sees them slows down, and passes among them in silence. Row after row of small American flags, stars and stripes waving in the wind, standing upright while the rain falls or the sun shines. The flags seem to go on forever, up and over the hill.

We fall silent knowing that each one represents a man or woman, each a father or mother, a son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle or aunt, a best friend. I stared at them, trying to imagine behind *each* flag the face of a person, one whose death had devastated a family, had shattered friends, had sent deep ravines of jagged pain through too many hearts.

Each flag was a symbol of a person, as inadequate as any metaphor we try to apply to God, never capturing all that lies behind it. But pointing toward it.

So for Memorial Day the Massachusetts Military Fund, and hundreds of volunteers planted all those flags, seeking some way to represent each fallen soldier from our state. Because they knew each one was so precious. Because we know God delighted in each one, a beloved.

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What is your image of God? Whatever it is, let it be one that enables you to grasp this notion, found in the first creation story told in the Hebrew text, in Genesis – that says *every* person was made in God's image. That we somehow, in ways we do not fully understand, are all vessels of the Holy, made only a little lower than God. That we are all amazing – that each of you is – as amazing as the remarkable flowers of this season.

Each of the soldiers, honored today on the hills of Boston Common was, also. A woman or a man, made in God's image.

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In this place, here at King's Chapel, what is the image of God that we speak of – with our words and by our actions?

How do we on this Memorial Day Sunday, best offer our memorials?

I am convinced that it is by honoring each soldier, of *every country* the world over, as the precious individual God created, in whom God will always delight.

Please, let us honor all humans this way. By us delighting in one another, each one valued and important. Only in this way will there ever be fewer flags to plant, on each successive Memorial Day.

Oh, that this may be so.

Amen.