

December 22, 2013 Norwalk

Pastoral Prayer

We've been waiting, O God, and patience is running thin. We've been waiting for deeper discounts at the stores, higher earnings on our savings, for the kids to arrive from out of town, and simply for the moment when the wrappings can finally come off those intriguing boxes beneath the tree. Around here we've been waiting for the lights to go out, the candles to be lit, Silent Night to be sung in a whisper, and the baby to be born, and it seems like the day – the evening – will never come.

Some have been waiting for other things as well – for their strength to return, or the test results to come back, or the virus to run its course; waiting for the surgeon's report or a response to all those resumes mailed or word that their unit is being called up for active duty. And it seems like neither are those days getting any closer.

Meanwhile, you, we know, have been waiting, as well – waiting for “the angels of our better natures” to be released and given room to fly; when war will be no more, neither hunger nor hatred nor blind indifference; when all your children “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” with you. Sometimes, after all these years, after all those prophets, after all those disciples and apostles and preachers and congregations, it must seem to you like the day will never come.

We offer, then, ourselves afresh to your re-creating work. Help us to be instruments of your peace – if not among the warring nations, at least with our next door neighbors; if not through negotiating treaties, at least by catalyzing healing within our own family; if not through a solution to world hunger, at least with an active concern for the hungry across town; if not through some empowerment of third-world countries, at least through some encouragement and appreciation of those just discovering and developing their gifts in schools and sheltered workshops and prisons and re-training programs around town.

We are grateful for all those tastes of joy that hint of the fullness of your goodness –

And we hold close in our hearts those grieving, those hurting, those healing, those frightened, and those struggling that we have named, as well as those known only to you.

Come, then, not only to us but to them as well; abide, then, with all of us, our Lord Emmanuel. For we pray in your name, in the way that you taught us, saying: Our father in heaven...

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 11:2

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.

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.

Come Wisdom

Throughout this Advent season we have invited the verses of the familiar carol "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" to teach us some things about what -- and who -- we are waiting for. You'll remember that the text of the song is at least as old as the 12th century -- the tune we know added in the mid-19th -- with each verse applying an Old Testament title to plaintive anticipation of the coming Messiah. The first verse, by which the song is typically known, lifts up what might be the key title of them all -- "Emmanuel", which translated means "God with us."

"Come, O Creator God, and be with us," the song implores. A remote God who simply peeks through the window of the world every now and then isn't really much good. "We need you HERE, Divine One; in the midst of us, elbowing your way to the center of our experience; getting your fingers dirty in the toil and trouble of our daily captivities."

A couple of weeks ago the second verse shifted our thoughts not so much to the darkneses that engulf us, but rather to the light -- the "Dayspring" -- that pierces it and rises over it.

The third verse that guides us this morning acknowledges that we don't always know what we need or where to go:

*O Come, thou Wisdom from on High
and order all things, far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and cause us in her ways to go.*

Wisdom. Heavenly wisdom -- ordering, enlarging, guiding. Last week, in the context of lighting the pink advent candle, we reflected a bit on the difference between happiness and joy -- happiness being more the circumstantial smile on the face; joy being the whole body smile that

emanates from the very soul; from the inside out. Wisdom has some of that same subtlety when compared with “intelligence” or even “brilliance.” One has to do with intellectual accumulation and accomplishment -- it’s what you demonstrate when you earn diplomas and degrees. You have read the books, written the papers, passed the tests and demonstrated some benchmark of mastery.

But that’s not quite the same thing as Wisdom. There is no doubt that book learning can be a seedbed for wisdom, but if the brain and the classroom that stimulates it quantify intelligence, Wisdom represents the percolation of that knowledge into insight. It is “smarts” animated by experience and perspective; it is the residue of listening and paying attention; of learning and reflecting and openness to realities larger than your cranial cavity can contain. Wisdom requires the fluent interaction of the mind, the heart, the soul, and the holy universe that holds them.

It’s always been interesting to me that scripture personifies Wisdom, and associates the movement of it among us with the Holy Spirit. In the book of Proverbs she -- for the grammatical form of the word in the original language is unflinchingly feminine -- routinely makes her appearance, as in the passage we earlier read where there is something rather pathetic about the account.

It’s hard to pin down exactly where that’s found. It isn’t the tone of it. The phrases, to be sure, are full of exuberance -- leaping and dancing and creating and delighting. Indeed, there is a kind of playfulness in the recollections and the obvious joy that filters through everything that is said -- a fitting spirit for a holiday week like we have in front of us.

So where is the sadness, you ask? It isn’t in the words, but rather in the circumstance. Here is lithe and lovely Wisdom -- the feminine face of the Godhead -- presenting her resume, as it were.

Wisdom, as God’s personal assistant. Wisdom, brought into the creative process at the very beginning to make sure everything came in on time, under budget and according to specifications. Wisdom as Inspector General and official Taste Tester. Wisdom as the filter through which all the Divine ambitions were passed. Which brings up a whole other disappointment. If everything God made passed Wisdom’s vetting, that rather suggests that avocado seeds, camels, ostriches and mosquitoes weren’t divine mistakes, after all. OK, but it’s hard to imagine that such oddities would have been intentional.

But that’s not the larger lament I feel reading this testimonial. Doesn’t it strike you as tragic that Wisdom has to go to all this trouble to make a case for herself? You might think She would be met with confetti and parades everywhere she went -- crowds and cheers and autograph seekers and television interviews. But no, according to this passage She goes all over town trying to get a hearing -- the market, the city gates, the freeway mix-master, downtown -- calling out, trying to attract the attention of anyone who will listen. But you don’t get the impression that She conjures a very long line.

Why, though, would that surprise us? When you look around your day-to-day interactions do you see Wisdom being raised to any pedestals? Expertise, yes. College degrees, and “knowledge” more generally stated. But Wisdom?

Once upon a time “elders” in the church or the tribe enjoyed some privileged respect; because they had lived long enough to learn the things that make for living. We understood that they had accumulated something the rest of us needed.

But life, these days, moves too quickly for that sort of soulful patience. It’s long since been a truism that technology is obsolete by the time you get it home from the store. You’ve no sooner bought the latest and greatest iPhone than the next generation model is released. The popular shorthand for talking about technological savvy divides people in the categories of “native” and “immigrant.” Technological Immigrants are those who come to this or that technology from some other tool -- pencils and paper and a first-class stamp for the mail, for example -- who have had to learn this new language and world of emails and texts and surfing the web. It is, for Technological Immigrants exactly like learning a second language with all the tedium and clumsiness that implies. Technological Natives are those who have never known anything else, who interact with the software and the operating systems and the ever tweaking hardwares fluently and intuitively rather than resentfully. That’s why we “immigrants” are always having to ask our kids or grandkids or the 10-year-old next door how to program our DVR or cell phone, or figure out what we have done to screw up our computers.

And it isn’t just technology. Information is multiplying at dizzying speed. For the past number of years it has been estimated that the volume of world data doubled roughly every two years. Estimates now suggest that in the immediate future that pace will accelerate to every 11 hours. Of course “data” isn’t the same thing as knowledge. General estimates of that more substantive body assert that the breadth of all we know doubles every one to two years. It is predicted that by 2020, our collective body of knowledge will double every 72 days.

In the midst of this constantly shifting “cutting edge,” it’s easy to understand how the Elders of a community come to be seen as dinosaurs -- the ones to be tolerated and looked after rather than sought out, consulted and revered. For one thing, the currency most valued in our time -- knowledge and technical expertise -- is something elders by and large don’t possess. For another, we simply don’t have time for Wisdom. We are looking for people who can tell us “how” and “when” and “how long”. Unfortunately, as urgent as such questions increasingly feel, their answers -- no matter how quickly or accurately they might be delivered -- will never be enough. Technical know-how is important -- expertise is a treasure all its own -- but we need wisdom to guide it, to consider it, to channel it -- maybe even refute it. It is, in other words, important to find people who can tell us and show us “how.” But isn’t it just as important to connect with others who can think with us about whether we should, and the likely implications if we do -- or if we don’t?

I long for a day when both will be honored -- the facility of youth and the wisdom of age. Both, because each is important, but each is very different. For the moment, however, Wisdom doesn’t get much of a hearing regardless of where she goes to offer her assets.

The song, though, hints that something deep within us recognizes the absence -- recognizes the disorder that results when the pieces of life and faith and living together are gathered but not mindfully sorted and assembled; how after awhile we just find ourselves stifled and crushed by the volume of it all. And how it is that we, too, find ourselves aching for the coming of one like the prophet Isaiah anticipated, on whom the spirit of the Lord shall rest...

*the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,*

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Because, while we can always stand to get a little smarter, when we look around at the way we treat each other, at the way we treat the ground beneath us and the air around us; at the way we treat our very selves, what we really need is help getting a whole lot wiser.

“I’m your Gal,” says the voice of Wisdom; “God’s creative right hand. I was there beside him, God’s daily delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”

Or as the Gospel of John describes the Christ, the Divine Word of Wisdom, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Wisdom. Broadly reflective, creatively discerning, comprehending Wisdom.

*O come, thou Wisdom, from on high
and order all things far and nigh
to us the path of knowledge show,
and cause us in her ways to go.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee
O Israel.*