

Following Your Guiding Star: Wisdom

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on December 22, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 and Wisdom of Solomon 7:23-8:1
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Here's a little Christmas trivia pop quiz—don't think too hard about it: how many wise men were there? If you thought, "Well, duh—there are three wise men," get ready for some cognitive dissonance. If we take a look at the first two verses from the second chapter of Matthew's gospel, where the wise men appear, we'll see this:

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'"¹

The text doesn't tell us how many wise men there were; it merely says that wise men came from the east. It may very well be that the number three got established because of verse 11:

"On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."²

Three gifts, so three wise men. And, over the nearly two thousand years that this story was first written, we have developed layers and layers of oral tradition about the wise men that are also not in the Bible. The three have names: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar. Balthazar has dark skin. And—as the children insisted last week—the three of them arrived on camels. We also have come to call them kings, as in the favorite Christmas carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are." None of this is in the Bible, and yet it's all common knowledge, born out in the images we see and sing about every Advent and Christmas season.

One of my favorite paintings of the wise men is by James Tissot, a 19th century French artist who traveled to the Middle East to get a sense of the landscape and people to make his many biblical paintings more accurate. The visuals may be accurate, but Tissot still offers the traditional view of the wise men, with three imposing figures on camels. They are, however part of a very long caravan of people and animals, which might suggest that some of these other figures may be additional wise men.

I know I may be meddling with beloved Christmas tradition here by insisting that there weren't three wise men, but that's not really my point. My point is that sometimes we allow those layers of tradition and convention to influence our thinking more than perhaps we should.

Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent, and we are wrapping up our sermon series on Following Your Guiding Star. We've been using the imagery from the nativity stories to explore what these

¹ Matthew 2:1-2, NRSV.

² Matthew 2:11, NRSV.

stories about the birth of Jesus can teach us about discernment and finding our path to God. We've explored stars and dreams and angels, and now we get to take a look at wisdom, as experienced in the wisdom of the Magi.

So, what **is** wisdom? According to one of my favorite theologians, Marcus Borg, “the subject matter of wisdom is broad. Basically, wisdom concerns how to live. It speaks of the nature of reality and how to live one’s life in accord with reality. Central to [wisdom] is the notion of a way or path, indeed of two ways of paths: the wise way and the foolish way.”³ Teachers of wisdom in many faith traditions speak of these two paths, encouraging us to follow one and warning us of the consequences of following the other.

Borg suggests that there are two kinds of wisdom. The first kind of wisdom is what he calls conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom “is the mainstream wisdom of a culture, ‘what everybody knows,’ a culture’s understandings about what is real and how to live.”⁴ It is the “dominant consciousness of any culture, [...] the most taken-for-granted understandings about the way things are [...] and the way [we are] to live.”⁵

Every culture has conventional wisdom, and although the specific content of that wisdom will vary from culture to culture, there are some common features of this type of wisdom across cultures.

“First, conventional wisdom provides guidance about how to live. It covers everything from highly practical matters such as etiquette to the central values and images of the good life found in a culture.”⁶ As children, we learned conventional wisdom when our parents taught us to say “please,” and “thank you,” and told us not to chew with our mouths open. Conventional wisdom also helps us understand what the central values of our culture are, what is worthwhile and what being successful and happy look like.

Another aspect of conventional wisdom is that it is “intrinsically based upon the dynamic system of rewards and punishments. You reap what you sow; follow this way and all will go well; you get what you deserve; the righteous will prosper—these are the constant messages of conventional wisdom. [...] Work hard and you will succeed.” The problem with this system of reward and punishment is, of course, that “if you don’t succeed, or are not blessed, or do not prosper, it is because **you** have not followed the right path,”⁷ not that there’s something wrong with the culture.

Finally, “conventional wisdom has both social and psychological consequences. Socially, it creates a world of hierarchies and boundaries. Psychologically, it becomes the basis for identity and self-esteem, [...] the internalized voice of culture, the storehouse of *oughts* [and *shoulds*] with in our heads, [...] functioning] as a generally critical [...] internal voice.”⁸

³ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Conventional wisdom can be important, because it helps us get along in our society. But it's not the only kind of wisdom, and it is not especially likely to lead us on a path of deep relationship with God. Instead, it is likely to take us on another route altogether.

The other type of wisdom that Marcus Borg identifies is what he calls subversive, or alternative wisdom. "This wisdom questions and undermines conventional wisdom and speaks of another way, another path."⁹

In the Jewish tradition, the word *wisdom* has several meanings. One meaning is that it is a literary genre. There are books in the Hebrew Bible—Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—and in the Apocrypha—Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon—that are known as wisdom books. As a literary genre, wisdom literature is educational or reflective in tone. It seeks to communicate how the world is, and how one is to act and live in the world.

Our second scripture reading this morning, from the book Wisdom of Solomon, is from this literary genre. It's from a collection of texts commonly known as the Apocrypha, and not all Christians consider them to be part of sacred canon. If you have a good study Bible that includes the Apocrypha, you'll find sixteen books sandwiched between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It's a fairly complicated story how these texts came to be part of—or not part of—sacred canon, which will take way too much time to explain here. Suffice it to say that Catholic and Orthodox Christians consider most of these texts to be part of the biblical canon of the Old Testament. Anglican Christians consider the books to be instructive and appropriate for personal devotion but not important enough for establishing doctrine. Protestant Christians do not consider the texts to be part of sacred scripture at all, which I think is a shame, since there are some fascinating stories and teachings here—especially in the text we've read today.

The Wisdom of Solomon was not actually written by King Solomon—it was probably written sometime between 100 BCE and 50 CE, long after Solomon is supposed to have lived, and right around the time that Jesus was alive. Instead, it is written in the *persona* of Solomon as a way to honor him, who is considered something of a patron saint of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.

Today's text from Wisdom of Solomon exemplifies one of the characteristics of Jewish wisdom literature, which is the personification of wisdom as a woman. In this passage, Woman Wisdom, whom scholars call *Sophia* after the Greek word for wisdom, is spoken of as—

“intelligent, holy,
unique, manifold, subtle,
mobile, clear, unpolluted,
distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen,
irresistible, beneficent, humane,
steadfast, sure, free from anxiety,
all-powerful, overseeing all,
and penetrating through all spirits”¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 70

¹⁰ Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-23, NRSV.

This is the type of alternative wisdom that subverts conventional wisdom and brings people into a closer relationship with God. The text suggests that Sophia enters into relationships with people and is the source of prophetic inspiration:

“In every generation, she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;
for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.”

Throughout the Wisdom of Solomon, Sophia is portrayed like this, as having qualities and attributes that are usually attributed to God. Scholars have long known about this close association of Woman Wisdom with God, but have most often dismissed it as merely an interesting and creative use of personification. But more recent scholarship, including that of Marcus Borg, has shown that this “language about *Sophia* is not simply personification of wisdom in female form, but personification of *God* in female form.”¹¹

You can see why this text might be considered subversive wisdom for those who pursue a more conventional religious path, who insist on imaging God only as male.

Marcus Borg sees Jesus as a teacher of this type of subversive, alternative wisdom. Through his parables, Jesus “invited his hearers to see God not as a [harsh] judge, but as gracious and compassionate.”¹² Jesus undermined conventional wisdom and taught that there is another path, a path of internal transformation that is brought about by a deep centering in God, rather than a focus on the external material world. “As one who knew God, Jesus knew God as the compassionate one, not as the God of requirements and boundaries. The life to which he invited his hearers was the life in the Spirit that he himself had experienced.”¹³

The alternative wisdom of Jesus was a challenging message for his time—and it is challenging for our time as well. Our secular culture is one that does not affirm the life of the Spirit that Jesus invites us into. Instead, our culture looks to the material world for satisfaction and meaning.

The dominant values of our culture—the conventional wisdom about what makes a good life—are what Marcus Borg call the three A’s: achievement, affluence, and appearance.

The alternative wisdom of Jesus calls us out of these material values and offers a way of being that leads from a life of requirements and measuring up and into a life of relationship with the Divine. It leads from a life centered in culture to life centered in God.¹⁴

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel of Jesus. And perhaps, this is what filled the wise men with joy as they found the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Perhaps they recognized, that he, like them, would become a wisdom teacher, one who has courage to go home by another road, to follow the path of alternative wisdom, and find a life centered in God. Amen.

¹¹ Ibid., 102

¹² Ibid., 82.

¹³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴ Ibid., 87-88