

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
The Festival of the Holy Trinity -- Year C
June 11-12, 2022
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5
St. John 16:12-15

At first it was, frankly, highly disappointing, almost disillusioning. Here I was, seminary graduate, newly-ordained pastor, making my first (and only) visit to the Holy Land and entering into the Holy City, Jerusalem, through the historic Damascus Gate, fully expecting to be overwhelmed by the grandeur of the old city, held to be sacred by three great faith traditions. I practically held my breath. Maybe, I should have held my nose or covered my ears. For as soon as one enters the Holy City through the Damascus Gate, one's senses are assaulted by the stench of competing aromas and by the cacophony of competing voices. Our little group had to struggle to make our way through the horde of street vendors who gather inside the gate, hawking their wares, who, having sensed that we were Americans, began shouting in English that they take U.S. dollars and would give us a great deal on everything from scarves to cigarettes to olive-wood souvenirs. Anyone entering this most holy of cities, expecting to be religiously moved and spiritually uplifted, would be brought back down to earth pretty quickly.

The book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom, God's wisdom, is just like one of those annoying street vendors. Lady Wisdom sits at the gates of the city, shouting, hawking her wares, trying to entice everyone passing by to come and get some wisdom from her. It's not a very uplifting image for Lady Wisdom -- or, for that matter, for the wisdom of God. And, perhaps worth noting, just a few verses later, the book of Proverbs describes Lady Folly, Lady Foolishness, in much the same way, sitting by the side of the road, enticing passersby to stop and to join her in forbidden pleasures, pleasures, which Proverbs reminds us, lead only to death.

When you get right down to it, the book of Proverbs is all pretty down-to-earth -- and, maybe even a bit disappointing, disconcerting, disillusioning, much like what so many Christian pilgrims experience entering the Holy City for the very first time.

Somehow, I fear, both those inside the Church and those outside live with a similar assumption, that experiences of faith should be spiritually uplifting and religiously moving. Now, those inside the Church may long for that, while those outside ridicule it. But, they share the same assumption. That faith, religion, spirituality (call it what you will) should take us to a higher plane. And, so on a Sunday like Trinity Sunday, we can talk about a "unity in trinity" and a "trinity in unity," about a God in three persons, each of which is "uncreated,"..."incomprehensible,"...and "eternal."* We can make use of our own in-house vocabulary: justification and redemption and sanctification and inspiration and salvation, all of which have precious little meaning outside of these walls.

But, somehow, our First Lesson from Proverbs will have none of it. Proverbs refuses to be spiritual or religious or to deal in pious but vague generalities. No, today God's Wisdom is down-to-earth. God's Wisdom meets on the streets, right where we live, competing for our attention, just as it must the other six days of the week. No, in Proverbs, God's Wisdom is personified, presented as Lady Wisdom and given a human face and a human voice -- must as in John's Gospel the "Logos," God's eternal Word, becomes fully human, with a human form and a human voice, as a Jew from the backwater streets of Nazareth.

I'm sure some of you are already aware of my discomfort with a word like "spiritual," a generally vague and nebulous word, describing that which is ethereal, intangible, and immaterial. Because, you see, at its heart, the Christian

Faith isn't "spiritual." It's "incarnational." God, taking on flesh, moving into our neighborhood, and standing on our street corner, crying out for our attention and competing for our patronage. And, in truth, isn't that exactly what happens on, at least, the other six days of the week? God's Wisdom, promising life, when every competing promise leads only to death. God's Wisdom, offering hope, when every competing voice leads only to despair. God's Wisdom, providing healing and restoration, when every competing voice would drive us only to guilt and to shame. In the great marketplace of ideas, filled with competing promises and alluring propositions, Lady Wisdom, God's Wisdom, calls out to each one of us, as we pass by.

No, in today's First Lesson from Proverbs, God's Wisdom refuses to be reduced to some intellectual concept or relegated to some vague "spiritual" verbage. God's Wisdom doesn't wait for you to discover her at some mountaintop retreat or in the deep recesses of private contemplation or through some arcane religious rituals or practices. Lady Wisdom is right here, looking for us and meeting us on the streets where we live.

Bishop Will Willimon writes that "any religion that keeps religion safely relegated away to the exclusively 'spiritual' isn't much of a religion at all." The bishop then goes on to quote a rabbi friend of his who is even more down-to-earth: "Any religion that doesn't tell you what to do with your pots and pans and with your genitals isn't worth your time!"**

Well, his rabbi friend stands in the great tradition of Lady Wisdom. God's Wisdom is practical and down-to-earth, not some highfalutin Greek philosophical ideal. Wisdom is about how we go about our business in a world of competing promises and conflicting propositions. Wisdom is about finding God's peace, when everything and everyone is screaming for our attention.

Wisdom is about trusting God's promise of life in a world that knows nothing but death.

To be sure, walking through the historic Damascus Gate and entering Jerusalem for the first time can be initially disappointing, even disillusioning. I know my senses were assaulted on every side. It was anything but a spiritual or religious experience. But, then, I suspect, Jerusalem was very much like that for Jesus when He entered Jerusalem for that final Passover -- street vendors shouting and vying for His business;...Temple merchants and moneychangers selling access to God;...political activists crying out for Him to be crucified. And, yet, in the midst of all this cacophony, down through the ages we hear one more voice, the voice of the Wisdom of God, competing for our attention and saying, "Father, forgive...." Amen

* from the Athanasian Creed, often used on Trinity Sunday
** William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2010, page 44