

"A Friend Named Sophia"

A meditation based on Proverbs 1:20-33; Wisdom 7:24-8:1; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

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Do you recall the first time someone dared to suggest to you that the Divine could be understood as feminine? I do. It was during a weekend seminar led by biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. For over 20 years, Schüssler Fiorenza has served as Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. At the time I met her during that seminar in the early 1980s, I was completing a masters' program and she was on a book tour of sorts. Schüssler Fiorenza had been invited by a Los Angeles-based Institute of Feminist Spirituality to present the core insights of her newly published scholarly work entitled, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. This groundbreaking book has, in the intervening 25 years, been translated into an additional ten languages, and its insights have literally encircled the globe.

We who first read her text gathered on a Friday evening. We were a group of about 30—mostly women—mostly students in one of several local theological programs of study. I recall Schussler-Fiorenza referring to the Divine Feminine, rather nonchalantly, as if everyone knew it was true. I looked around the room. No one seemed disturbed. I looked up...no lightning...yet...! As the weekend progressed, the notion of the Divine Feminine settled into a comfortable place in my soul, and for these past twenty-five years or so, I have delighted in learning that my learning that weekend was part of a millennia-long understanding of the

Divine. Schüssler Fiorenza could speak nonchalantly about the Divine Feminine, because, well, after thousands of years, it just wasn't a news flash anymore!

Today, our lectionary readings offer us two specific examples of the Divine Feminine. Yes, right there in the Bible the Divine is referred to as female! She is called by many names, Lady Wisdom, Sophia, and Holy Spirit among them. As Sophia, She is known as the Wisdom of God, personified. Scripture tells us that She is our companion—refreshing us, reminding us that we are made in the image of God, cheering us on as we seek the sacred in the everyday. Much of the material about Sophia—the Divine Feminine—is found in the ancient wisdom literature of scripture. Wisdom literature is that portion of the Bible which has been labeled “non-canonical” and discarded from many of our modern translations. It includes such books as The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus also called Sirach, and Baruch. These books, and others like them, were written during the so-called intertestamental period, sometime around the year 200 BCE. Along with these books that did not make the final editorial cut is one that did! It is the book of Proverbs, a series of collections of sayings dating back to the 6th century BCE...the clearest trace of wisdom literature in our Bibles today.

The wisdom literature—both within the canon and without—provides fascinating and fantastic tales about this Being known as Lady Wisdom, or Sophia. She is alternately pictured as human and divine, as creator and created. The tradition of Sophia was strong into the first century CE, with many followers adhering to Lady Wisdom as an emanation of the Divine. In various parts of the gospels in our Christian Scriptures, this more ancient wisdom tradition is quoted by Jesus. Why? Because Sophia was known, respected, trusted. At the time the gospels were written, Jesus was still unfamiliar, and, to put it bluntly, was in need of a PR campaign. Wisdom, Sophia, the Divine Feminine, provided a perfect advocate!

Now, of course, 2,000 years later, the tables are turned. Very few, if any of us, know much about Sophia, while the tales and legends about Jesus have grown exponentially. How sad, that history did not have room for both male and female emanations of the Divine to coexist peacefully.

Only in a few obscure passages of the book of Proverbs do we find references to Lady Wisdom, and her intimate connection to God that we have read in the wisdom literature this morning is all but lost to us in our traditional scriptures. Though Her presence is clouded, believers through the centuries have looked to Lady Wisdom, Sophia, as a model for life and living.

In various psalms, the psalmist describes a life of wisdom, a life that embodies the values of Lady Wisdom, as one in which God is respected; God is sought in the everyday events of life. Agreeing with the psalmist about living with Wisdom, is the author of James, who writes that a wise person is one who keeps their tongue from speaking evil and deceit, who consciously and intentionally moves away from evil, who does good just because it needs to be done in order to bring balance to life.

The readings we heard this morning from Proverbs and the Book of Wisdom, paint a colorful and metaphoric picture of Wisdom's essence, her everyday life. Here is One who does not shrink from the civic center, but places Herself at the very busiest corner of town, making Herself known and available to all who pass by. She shouts out, "I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you." I think of those faithful members of our local Citizens Action for Peace group, who, since the first week of the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, have stood at one of our community's busiest corners every Friday to speak hopefully and cheerfully of peace. I think of the millions of people, who through history, have marched in Washington, in London and Dublin, in Capetown and Pretoria, and in countless city centers

around the globe to do as Sophia, Lady Wisdom, has done...to bring light into the shadows, to offer kindness instead of derision, and to precipitate ease for anyone who listens to Her counsel.

Dianne Bergant, a professor of biblical studies, describes Wisdom "...as an ancient deity or cosmic being, [who] always invites, cajoles, persuades. She never commands, as does law. She feeds the desire for knowledge and insight; she satisfies the hunger for learning. Wisdom is interested in the simple, the innocent, the childlike, those who are eager to learn. She oversees all of the mysteries of the universe; in her hands are the secrets of life. These are the delicacies with which she spreads her table; this is the fare that she offers her guests. No one can survive without Wisdom; the way of understanding is the way to life."

In the reading from the Wisdom of Solomon, Lady Wisdom, Sophia, is more mobile than any GPS or iPhone...She is not bound by physical substance, and so can permeate all things. She is referred to as the breath of God, the power of God, as a pure emanation of God, a reflection of Divine light. She can do all things; She renews all things; and illuminates more than sun and stars put together. Lady Wisdom, Sophia, reaches powerfully all around the earth, and in every generation She passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God.

The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, used two terms—Sophia (Wisdom) and Logos—to describe aspects of God's being that helped form the world and were manifest in natural law and apparent in virtuous human lives. The masculine term, Logos, plays a central role in the Christology of the Gospel of John, and some scholars have suggested that Jesus and John the Baptist were understood as prophets of Sophia (Wisdom). In any case, the broad notion of an aspect of God reaching in to the world, whether known as Logos or Sophia, played a significant role in the development of our understanding of Christ.

In scripture—and we see this in today's readings—Wisdom is typically contrasted with folly in order to give instruction on how to live a sound life. In some ways, Wisdom's instruction is an articulation of conventional wisdom, but Her words can also take on a prophetic quality. Some of the teaching is merely practical, but there is considerable moral content as well. Wisdom cries out in the streets and at the city gates—that is, in the midst of human social activity—pleading with the people to abandon foolishness and follow her ways. She describes the consequences of one's life choices: foolish living will ruin one's life, but those who listen to her “will be secure and will live at ease, without disaster.”

The conventional wisdom of today's readings has its place: foolish life choices do in fact undermine happiness and social well-being. The devastating effects of various addictions are well-known in our society and affect individuals and families and whole communities. Spreading gossip, putting someone else down, passing on juicy tales—all of these cautions from the author of James—are dangerous ways we human beings build ourselves up and find a place for ourselves in the world, at the expense of others.

Yet, with persistent and moment-to-moment appearance, Lady Wisdom guides us, Sophia offers Herself as the Divine Feminine. Perhaps you, like me, have experienced Her gifts...a little whisper in the middle of your day, that when you follow it, leads to a serendipitous moment of grace. Or perhaps Lady Wisdom offers you a breath of fresh air in the form of a new idea or a grace-filled possibility or a clarified decision to forgive and move on. Or perhaps Sophia leads you directly to that city center, that public place of action and justice and transformation of society. Today's passages offer us many ways of journeying with Wisdom, of traveling life's path with a friend named Sophia.

Shane Hipps, minister of Trinity Mennonite Church in Glendale, Arizona, just wrote a fascinating book, entitled, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, in which he

describes two kinds of conversions. One, he writes, “can feel like a light switch has been flipped from off to on, and everything is suddenly illuminated,” and the other is a different kind of conversion that can “feel like the gradual brightening of a long darkness – or like a long fade from doubt into clarity.”

Perhaps this journey with the Divine Feminine feels to you like that quick flip of a switch, that “aha” you have experienced as did I in that long-ago seminar. Or perhaps this path with Lady Wisdom as your companion is more of a gradual enlightenment... a longer, more patient walk along a road you’ve always known to be true, but didn’t have quite the language to describe it. No matter. By whatever path you travel, today you are invited to experience that companionship of Lady Wisdom, you are nudged to follow that holy whisper of the Divine Feminine, you are welcomed to befriend Sophia who, in turn, passes into your holy soul and makes you a friend of God.

Amen and Blessed Be.