

Who Is She?

A Meditation on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

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"Does not Wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?"

– Proverbs 8:1

Michelangelo wanted nothing to do with painting the Sistine Chapel. He was a sculptor. His skillset was in chiseling marble. What did he know about creating frescoes, of larger-than-life figures, on a curved ceiling, so they would look proportional from sixty feet below?

What is the right ratio for mixing the plaster? How does one trowel so that the plaster sticks smoothly? What timing is needed for plaster to dry enough to paint, yet remain wet enough for the pigment to integrate into the plaster? Frescos were not his forte. Michelangelo knew it.

Moreover, whatever he painted would be compared to renown Renaissance artists working in their actual areas of expertise – with their masterpiece paintings and tapestries on the walls.

Was it mere reluctance or sheer terror that caused him to say “no” to the Pope’s command, refusing for five years to get on with the work? I do not know. What I do know is that, once he gave in, he hated the next four years of his life atop the scaffolding, not lying prone but crawling, standing, bending over backward, arms painfully working over his head.

Listen to this lament Michelangelo penned while painting the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling:

I've already grown a goiter from this torture, hunched up here like a cat...
My stomach's squashed under my chin, my beard's pointing at heaven,
my brain's crushed in a casket, my breast twists like a harpy's. My brush,
above me all the time, dribbles paint, so my face makes a fine floor for droppings!...
Because I'm stuck like this, my thoughts are crazy...
I am not in the right place—I am not a painter.¹

¹ Mazur, Gail (translator). *To Giovanni da Pistoia: "When the Author Was Painting the Vault of the Sistine Chapel,"* 1509.

Preachers feel much the same way about Trinity Sunday – historically a minor feast day -- one rarely celebrated with more than the singing of *Holy, Holy, Holy* and an unmemorable dogmatic sermon attempting to explain the mystery of one God in three persons; fully three yet fully one; one in essence, substance, and nature...yet three separate, unique, and distinct beings.

The doctrine of the Trinity poses a theological conundrum of the highest magnitude. Yet, while once fiercely debated (complete with books burned and heretics hanged), today it is greeted by yawns, even from seminarians in systematic theology courses, where they learn that Trinitarian Christianity was not even conceptualized until the late fourth century, and that no congregation celebrated Trinity Sunday prior to the mid-tenth century.

You might be surprised to learn that the word “trinity” never appears in the scriptures. References to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- all three of them within verses of close proximity -- are rare and often editorial additions. But they are to be found in John 16:12-15 – a section of Jesus’ farewell discourse where he says to the disciples:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine...

In that scriptural snippet, what ties the Trinity’s three persons together is “truth.” Jesus, described elsewhere in John as “full of grace and truth,” here reassures the disciples that, after he is gone, “the Spirit of truth will guide” them...and he suggests that the truth he shared, the truth into which the Spirit will guide them, also is the truth he first received from the Father.

Frankly, the promise that God will guide us into what is true feels critically important in an age of fake news and alternative facts, enhanced videos and disinformation campaigns, coverups and conspiracy theories, not to mention just plain old-fashioned lying. As William Sloane Coffin once preached, the work of the Christian church is to “liv[e] the truth in a world of illusions.” That is not as easy as it sounds – not when, as they say, “Truth is elusive,” “Truth is stranger than fiction,” “You want the truth! You can’t handle the truth!”

But if John is right when he writes “You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” then the reality that God – Creator, Christ, and Spirit – is our basis, source, and guide for sorting out truth from illusion, truth from fiction, and truth from deceit, is reason for hope.

Especially when we realize that, along with truth, wisdom dwells as well within the Trinity.

It may seem strange that, for Trinity Sunday, the scripture is a reading from Proverbs about wisdom. A nod to the wisdom needed to untangle the doctrine of the Trinity? No. Stranger still may be to learn that the word “wisdom” in this text is a proper noun, the name of a person, a female biblical character called “Lady Wisdom” (as opposed to “Madam Folly” who makes herself known in Proverb’s previous and subsequent chapters). Ever hear of either of them?

Lady Wisdom. Did you know, in Hebrew scripture, only four characters have more material written about them? God, Job, Moses, and David. Lady Wisdom enjoys more pages in the Old Testament² than Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, Isaiah, Sarah, Miriam, Adam, or Noah!³ And there are traces of her to be discovered in the New Testament, if you know where to look.

Then, how come you never have heard of her? The short answer: patriarchal repression caused Lady Wisdom to disappear from Christian consciousness and spirituality, invisible though in plain sight, cast aside while still in the pages of scripture. Her traits were transferred first, by Judaism, to the masculine Hellenistic concept of the Logos (the Word)...and then, in turn, passed on by the early church fathers to the person of Christ (the Word made flesh).

Fourth century debates over the Trinity and whether Christ was subordinate to or the co-equal of God the Father is what has kept Lady Wisdom from having the impact upon us she should enjoy. The church fathers wanted her silenced, lest the implication of any equivalency between Lady Wisdom and Jesus keep them from declaring Christ as equal to God.

Yet, here she comes, playfully leaping, dancing off the pages in today's scripture lesson. Lady Wisdom – the feminine side of God. Lady Wisdom – the personification of one of God's highest attributes. Lady Wisdom – a spiritual being in the heavenly court. So strong! So proud! She introduces herself to us as the co-creator of life, of the universe, connected to and working side-by-side with God as architect and builder of the cosmos itself. She calls us to seek her out, follow her, learn from her, promising she can be found "on the heights...beside the way...at the crossroads...beside the gates...at the portals..." Lady Wisdom pops up all over the place, not just in church and synagogue, but in nature, courtrooms, marketplaces...

It is as if to say Lady Wisdom cannot be kept in hiding forever. She can be found anywhere and everywhere. For wisdom was the first thing God created – prior to earth and sky, sun and moon, day and night, animals and humans. Without Lady Wisdom, God created nothing, at least according to scripture. Indeed, God infused the entire creation with wisdom.

She even can be found in Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam*.

Looking at the painting, our eye naturally focuses first on God's right hand reaching out to insert life into the first human being. But, please note as well, God's left hand reaching out to touch the Christ-child, according to Paul "the firstborn of all creation...[in whom] all things in heaven and on earth were created."⁴ God's left elbow surrounds a woman, so that God the Creator, the Christ-child, and the woman form a trinity.

² Note: Based on the Roman Catholic versions of the Bible which include certain books of wisdom literature not found in Protestant versions.

³ Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig. *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989. Page 15.

⁴ See Colossians 1:15-20.

Who is she?

Not Eve. Looks nothing like Eve in the next fresco Michelangelo painted on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling.

Not Mary. Even in Roman Catholic theology, Mary was not present when the world was created.

Personally, I think she looks like Scarlett Johansson. But clearly that cannot be the case.

So, let me this morning introduce you a biblical character you may never have noticed, though she has been around forever. Let me introduce you to Sophia. Lady Wisdom. The third person the Bible says was there “before the beginning of the earth” – her place in the Trinity now assumed in part by the Christ, and in other part by the Holy Spirit, upon the two of whom the early church fathers transferred in large measure the feminine side of God.

The woman in the painting is Sophia – Lady Wisdom – the wisdom with which God created the world, the wisdom still to be found in the world, the wisdom we need to discern the truth we need to hear in order to build a better world.