

Eleventh Sunday in Pentecost  
Text: Proverbs 9:1-6 and John 6:51-58  
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA  
August 16, 2009

### "She Who Was, She Who Is"

My friend Marie, her husband BJ and their soon to be four year old daughter, Lily were driving home from the grocery store one evening. Marie and BJ were admiring the scenery as they drove. They began to talk about the mountains that were off in the distance and how big they were. Their daughter Lily asked: "Mama, did you paint them?" BJ answered: "No. God made them." Lily responded: "She made them?" BJ asked: "Is God a woman or a man?" Lily answered: "She's a woman."

Did you see the similarities between the first reading and the gospel reading for today? Both readings are invitations. An invitation by Jesus to eat his flesh, the bread that came down from heaven. To drink his blood which is true drink. To partake in a meal that promises eternal life. And an invitation by Wisdom. An invitation to eat the bread that **she** has prepared, to drink the wine **she** has mixed. An invitation to eat at the banquet of wisdom instead of the banquet of foolishness.

We know who Jesus is. The Son of God, the divine, the Savior of the world. But who is this Wisdom person? Wisdom is found throughout the Bible in both the Old Testament and the New. But she is mentioned most in the book of Proverbs. This mysterious woman Wisdom becomes *Sophia* in Greek. Sophia, the Wisdom of God. The first eight chapters are all about her. Proverbs says that she was with God from the beginning. **She was with God from the beginning.** She was alongside God when the world was created. When the mountains were formed, when the oceans were filled, when the seeds were planted, she was there. She was there when the human race was born. **She was there,** beside God, creating.

I'm sure many of you have seen pictures or maybe even seen the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in real life. Probably the most famous portion of this most amazing piece of artwork is the creation of man. Adam is reclining on the side of a mountain with his left arm extended out. God is reaching one finger out to touch Adam, to give him life. In that painting by Michelangelo, God has his arm around a beautiful, auburn haired, female figure. Sophia. Woman Wisdom. **She was there.**

This sounds familiar, doesn't it? Do you remember John's "Christmas story". His gospel account is the one without the baby, without the angels and the shepherds. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. If you translate this literally from the Greek to the English it says: "the Word pitched a tent among us." John got this expression from Wisdom Sophia!

There are many writings that were left out of our Bibles, writings that helped the authors of the books of the New Testament. Usually in Study Bibles you can find some of these books between the Old Testament and the New Testament. They are called "The Apocrypha". Ecclesiasticus is one of those books in the Apocrypha. It is a book, like Proverbs, that talks a lot about Wisdom Sophia. In one of chapters Wisdom addresses the

reader, she says: "Then the Creator of all things instructed me: Pitch your tent in Jacob, make Israel your inheritance."

John used these words in his telling of the Christmas story. But why didn't John say that Wisdom Sophia pitched a tent among us? Jesus was a man. This is most certainly true. John couldn't say Wisdom Sophia was made flesh and dwelt among us. So John changed the words a little bit. He instead used the word *logos* when telling the story of Jesus' birth, a word that is masculine in gender in the Greek. That word *logos*, became the Word, with a capital W in John's gospel.

And there are other places in John where Wisdom is heard. Proverbs tells us that by knowing her, by knowing Wisdom, we come to know the Lord. In Proverbs 8, just before our reading for today, it says: "And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death." This also sounds familiar: "For whoever finds me finds life and obtains the favor from the Lord." This sentence is one of the major themes of John's Gospel. In John Chapter 14 it says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also."

We would be correct in saying that Jesus-Sophia is Jesus' full name. Jesus was a man but he was Wisdom Sophia incarnate.

Why have we held on so tightly to this male image of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit when we are surrounded by all of these female attributes and images?

The creation story in Genesis says: So God created humankind in his own image...male and female God created them. If both males and females were created in God's own image than certainly God couldn't and can't be just one gender. God is too big, too mysterious to be contained by just male pronouns.

The word spirit in English comes from *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. Both of these words are feminine in gender. **Both of them.**

It is incredibly hard to open our minds to something that we are not used to. So many of our hymns and so much of our Lutheran liturgy speak of God only as male. When you pray this week, I would like to encourage you to use some new ways of naming God. It might be difficult and even impossible for some of you to change the pronouns from he to she or to say Mother instead of Father. I know this. My mother, who is a liberal feminist who went to Kent State in the late 60s still can not bring herself to refer to God as "she". So, I will tell you all the same thing I tell her. That's okay. There are certainly many names for God that aren't gender specific. You can say Creator God, Holy One, Most Divine, and one of my favorites that a friend from seminary shared with me – You who are both ancient and new. Amen.