

## READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Sermon preached by Sarah Segal McCaslin  
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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

She speaks: “Does not Wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice? To you, I call, and my cry is to all that live.”

This is what Wisdom does. She opens the eyes and unplugs the ears of all that live. She calls out from the gates of the city, from a high place, at the busiest intersection. And from where does she draw her authority? From God. Not as an afterthought, but at the very beginning, even before Creation. Alongside God, as God’s delight and God’s coworker, she shares in rejoicing at the Creation of the world and the Creation of humanity.

Wisdom speaks to us: “Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth... before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth-”

And were we to read the verses not included in today’s pericope, we would hear the purpose of her cries. We would hear Wisdom’s entreaty to listen to and follow her instructions for righteous living. Because to follow Wisdom is to seek the noble life and to be rewarded.

This is a magnificent passage, and the female voice resonates majestically. The masculine is, for a moment, set aside and the feminine steps into the spotlight. Not quietly or passively, but with the grand confidence of one who knows that she is close to God, close to the very source of all things, and herself the means to access closeness with God.

Wisdom speaks: “I was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before God always.”

Though it is tempting to stop here, to revel in the female power of Wisdom, who is also known as Sophia, in the Greek, it is premature. Though it might seem unnecessary to dig into the context that produced both wisdom literature and its female personification, understanding the source is crucial to understanding the message. And we can not accept a message without first reading between the lines.

Wisdom literature was a popular and prolific genre of the Ancient Near East. The wisdom literature that we find in our Bible, in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, is filled with images and parallels to the wisdom traditions of Egypt, Mesopotamia and other ancient cultures. Though the Book of Proverbs is attributed to King Solomon, we now know it to be a collection of material with many contributors, gathered over a long period of time and edited in the latter part of Israelite history by a scribal school.

It is possible that the portions of Proverbs that include the female personification of Wisdom were composed during a time when the central authority of the monarchy was compromised and Israelites turned inward to the private domain of the family. In this way, the roles of women, traditionally bounded by the walls of the house, would have taken on increased prominence and recognition.

Though this may be an accurate rendering of the historical context in which Wisdom raises her voice, it would be erroneous to presume that women received anything that suggested gender equity. Even at her most powerful, Wisdom is crafted merely as a learning tool for boys' education. Woman Wisdom, in this text, is partnered with God, but in the surrounding chapters, she is partnered with Woman Stranger, or Woman Folly- the seductive and manipulative woman who tempts boys down the path towards destruction. Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly are caricatures of actual women, literary and educational devices created by and for men, with only partial truths about women's real lives.<sup>1</sup>

Though it is tempting to stop here, and to simply reject Scripture that caricatures women for the purpose of male education, it is also premature. Though it might seem fruitless to dig even deeper into the context that produced this imagery and these voices, understanding the power of the Holy Spirit to transform is essential to understanding the God-breathed message. We have to continue reading between the lines.

Within the private domain of the house in ancient Israel, a woman performed the roles of mother, wife, daughter, sister, caretaker, cook, and maid, but she likely also performed the roles of business administrator, conflict resolver, disciplinarian, teacher, investment manager, artisan, weaver, hostess, and judge. The private domain was hers, and her influence upon her male dependents- husband, father, son and brother- is incalculable. She might have been present when her younger brother received his reading and writing lessons; or as her father read and edited scrolls of proverbs; or as her husband labored to resolve a dispute or ethical dilemma. She leaned over their shoulders, shared in their learning, offered her opinions, made her mark.

These women imparted and shared wisdom in every corner of that house. And that wisdom, subtly conveyed, made its way through the clay walls of that house, through the marble walls of the royal court, through the seemingly impenetrable walls of patriarchy, and in to the scrolls of wisdom literature, into Scripture.

How can we know with certainty? Well, all we have to do is open our eyes and unplug our ears. We will see that this has been going on since the very beginning of time. That Wisdom is, as the theologian Elizabeth Johnson suggests, the "female personification of God's own being in creative and saving involvement with the world."<sup>2</sup>

Just the other day, I heard a program on NPR called Wisdom Watch. How apt! They profiled Dr. Joycelyn Elders, the first African American and second woman to serve as the United States Surgeon General, under the Clinton Administration.<sup>3</sup> During her term in office, she argued the case for universal health coverage. She was a strong advocate for comprehensive health education, including sex education, within the schools. She was, and continues to be, outspoken on these issues, regardless of how they are received.

From the heights of the federal government, she took a stand, even when it was unwelcome, even at the cost of her job, and she spoke the truth.

Wisdom speaks to Joycelyn, “On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand.”

In another story this week, I heard about Yanar Mohammed, who is the founder of the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq. Born and raised in Iraq, she moved to Canada in 1993 with her husband and son, where she worked as an architect and sculptor. After the fall of Baghdad in 2003, Yanar began to hear about the declining situation for women in her country under Islamic Sharia law. She moved back to Iraq with her family and formed her organization to protect women from increasing abuse, exploitation and death.<sup>4</sup>

In a country that no longer recognizes her civil and social rights, in the midst of threats against her life, Yanar cries out in the city, demanding that the world take notice.

Wisdom speaks to Yanar, “Beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out.”

These are amazing stories of wise women with prophetic voices. But I almost didn’t tell them.

When I first began my efforts to locate the message for today in this passage from Proverbs, I kept hitting a brick wall. Not the brick wall of a new pastor, or the brick wall of exhaustion and over work. These walls exist, of course, any pastor will tell you, but this had a different quality, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I had done my research, read stacks of material, meditated and prayed upon the text. But the message remained silent, hidden in those pages of notes.

And then, as I was riding the crosstown bus, it hit me. I know that I’m not alone when I share with you that I get my best work done, as well as some of my most profound spiritual nourishment, riding public transportation. It seems entirely counterintuitive, and a bit nuts, I know, but it’s what works for me. So on an afternoon not too long ago, I decided to get out of the office, make a visit to a parishioner, and then ride the bus back.

At that moment, I realized that while I read and reread the Proverbs text, I had also been repeating to myself in the back of my mind, ‘It’s too soon to do another sermon on women.’ For those of you who may not have been here last month, Dr. Walton preached a remarkable sermon on women in the ministry, using the story of Lydia from the Book of Acts, as well as a passage from the Book of Proverbs.

But I, all on my own, in working through this material, decided that two sermons about women in less than a month would be too much. Without thinking, which is exactly what happened- I stopped thinking- I began to doubt the absolute necessity of speaking the truth as it presents itself in Scripture.

Instead of following the Spirit, who leads and inspires those who listen with hearts open, I followed the little voice of doubt in my head that said some will disapprove of hearing another message about women. I am not proud of this moment, though by living through it, I gained the insight that we do not preach for the approval of some; we preach the Word of God, which needs no human approval. And God will never grow tired of a truthful message, no matter how many times it's repeated.

On that crosstown bus, with my Bible opened to Proverbs, chapter 8, Wisdom intervened and I read between the lines of my own hesitancy, to find the truth revealed.

As a congregation, we can congratulate ourselves on knowing how to read between the lines, and on knowing how to peel away the layers of patriarchy that unfortunately remain embedded in our Scripture and our confessions, and sometimes in our psyches. In a few moments, we will stand and say together the Nicene Creed, one of the oldest and most ecumenical creeds of the Christian Church. Unfortunately, its wording remains strongly masculine, lacking in imagination as it describes God. While the Church rightly and consistently states that God is beyond identification with either male or female, the daily language of Scripture and creeds oftentimes convey a different message. And so while opportunities present themselves in preaching, instruction, music and liturgy to re-imagine God beyond gender categories; it remains a personal and internal exercise to read between the lines as we encounter the stale language of patriarchy in parts of our tradition.

There is still life and Spirit and truth and love in these creeds, and I encourage you to hear the message that creeps up between the lines, to find the ways that God speaks through the Holy Spirit in language that does not and cannot reflect the fullness of our reality in Christ. Language will never be a barrier for God, only for us.

And when we move from the affirmation of our faith to the Lord's Supper, I encourage you to think back to times when women were not welcome as equals at the sacramental meal, and in many places still are not. And then to remember that even in times when women's voices were forced into silence in the church, women were present, kneading the dough that becomes the bread of life, pouring the cup that becomes the cup of salvation, ironing the paraments, polishing the silver, visiting the homebound, instructing the children, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, reading and interpreting Scripture and in a thousand other ways imparting their wisdom upon those whose voices carried the privilege to speak.

Truly, we could hear the voice of Woman Wisdom every week, gather up the stories of prophetic women every day, and still never run out of truth to tell.

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<sup>1</sup> Carole Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) p. 16

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10540974>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10543975>  
<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2007/taliban.asp>