

September 6, 2009

Wisdom

Proverbs 22, Mark 7: 24-27; James 2: 1-17

It was so difficult to choose a text for today – the Mark reading really tugged at me. Just listen to it again. (read Mark 7: 24-27)

It's a tough one eh? I find this reading very challenging. There's a lot of good, deep stuff here....layers. Questions come up for me every time I read it. And I LIKE IT when a text rubs at me a bit....it's like an invitation to go deeper.

I chose, in the end, not to focus on the Gospel reading this morning....but if I HAD.... I think I would have tried to write it from the point of view of this woman. Wouldn't you like to hear that mom's story? What brought her there....what she thought, felt, and what happened after? Or what about the daughter? I'd like to hear her speak, too.

Are there any writers here? Poets? Is that something you'd consider taking on some day? For now, I will say only one more thing about this text: Mark, the author, has set this up as a parallel, I believe, an example, of Wisdom's voice calling from outside. Proverbs says that Wisdom calls from outside, from the street corner and the midst of the city...not from within the gathered community. And here, I think that among other things, Mark is writing this so that Wisdom speaks from outside in the voice of a desperate and marginalized woman.

To me scripture is like a prism. A jewel. We hold it up to the light of our own wisdom and experience and trust that the light will shine through...and then with just a little twist – a whole new colour emerges. Another turn, another view. Another beautiful colour we'd not seen before. I'm hoping that we have a lot of time together, you and I, to do just that – to let this story dance and sway in the window of our own common life – and see what colours we will discover.

For today, though, I want to go back to the other readings; specifically to the concept of Wisdom. Because from now on and well into the fall, all the readings will be variations on a theme – they'll be wisdom based scriptures.

At the risk of telling you what you already know, let me say this:
Within the bible there are three main worldviews. The Question on which they differ is this: How do you find God? Where do we go if we want to experience the Holy?
Encounter the Divine? If you're looking for God, where do you go?

So the Bible has three answers to that. Three schools of thought.

- 1) the priestly tradition,
- 2) the prophetic tradition

3) the wisdom tradition

I'll go over them briefly first:

First, the priestly tradition. These people would say – if you want to find God – simple – go to church! In this world view, the primary way to encounter the Divine is through religious practices. Communal worship. Prayer. Hymns. In the case of the Jewish tradition, rituals of cleanliness and sacrifice. The formal worship life of your faith. That's how and where to find God. Examples of that literature in scripture are the first chapter of Genesis with its emphasis on keeping the Sabbath, some of the Abraham and Sarah material, the book of Leviticus, and so on. God comes to us, they would say, mostly through worship.

Now: to balance that, there are the prophetic voices. The prophets would say ...worship is fine BUT....the truth is, and human nature being what it is....we can get so caught up in the formalities of worship, so focused on the "right" way of doing things, the proper colour hangings and making sure that the building doesn't fall down, that God gets pushed back and sometimes right out of the picture.

My friend Karen worships at a church where there is a rule for everything, and a book for communion servers that tells them how many centimeters from the centre aisle they must be when they're serving...you get the point. If you don't watch out, the prophets say, you can lose focus on God. When my grandmother was a girl, she says, when they went to church they were judged by their hats and their clothing. It was a fashion parade. Now, I think that partly Gram used that as an excuse not to go, but in part she was right too. God forgive us, we've done that to each other in the past.

And prophets today, as well as those in the Bible, say THAT HAS TO STOP. Remember Amos, that old goat herder from Tekoa, thunders down out of the hills, mad as anything, speaking for God and saying "I hate, I despise your feasts!" You want to get in touch with God???? Do justice. Treat the poor with respect. Get away from this farce you call worship.

The prophetic tradition is very reactive in that way....and it can be quite individualistic as well. God, for them, is not so much experienced by a community, as by one individual whose solitary task it is to bring the others back into line. And – often, in this way of thinking, God is experienced in rather dramatic ways: visions, dreams....

So...a prophet would say....you want to know what God requires of you? I'll tell you. How do I know? God told me in a vision that's how, and now I'm telling you.

It's fascinating to watch the scriptures have this conversation internally – a system of checks and balances...this is great.

So: two points of view: and now one more. The Wisdom tradition.

Those who look at the world with the eyes of Wisdom say, Yes God is in the worship life of the people and, Yes God is sometimes experienced in dramatic and individualistic ways that call us back to the truth from which we inevitably stray. But mostly, though, Mostly, If you want to experience God, encounter the Holy – Just look around. God is first and foremost in the every day world.

In your life.

At your breakfast table.

Where you work

In nature

And in our best efforts to live ethically and reasonably every day.

It's not rocket science – and you don't need special equipment – intellectual, spiritual or otherwise. It's doing your best. It's using your head. Living a morally sound, reasonable life. Working it out together when the answer is not obvious. Common sense.

I've been here one week and three days – so what do I know? But it seems to me so far that this church is a Wisdom-based church. Earthy, common sense, reason-things-out, do the right thing, and we have no monopoly on Truth or Holiness. That kind of attitude. That's the posture of Wisdom, and although it doesn't get as much air play, it's as Biblical a posture as you're going to get.

In Israel, Wisdom became so highly prized, that writers and poets and dreamers began to speak of Wisdom as a person. A woman, in fact. And eventually, as part of God's very Self. There's a fabulous reading coming up soon that will take us more into that.

You can see that the book of James is coming from a place like that. Worship is wonderful, he'd say...but if you get to a place where a poor person isn't welcome, it's not worship at all.

My friend Robyn is an ordained minister in Maritime Conference, and she sometimes assumes the persona of Gracie the bag lady, and sometimes Gracie preaches. She led worship at Maritime conference one year as Gracie – it was powerful. Anyway....she had been sponsored in her candidacy by a big downtown church, and years later it was their anniversary and they invited her to be their guest preacher. Can you see where this is going? Yup. She decided that Gracie should preach. So...she showed up at the church about an hour ahead of time and sat on the steps as people entered...people who hadn't been there in ages, coming back for the special service....honoured guests from the community....all passing this bag lady on the steps. The ushers talked to her and finally asked her to leave. They hadn't even looked at her – if they had, they would have seen who she was....

Wisdom says

There is something beneath, and within, holding us together that is stronger than anything that divides us. Built into the very foundation of the universe is a force that yearns for wholeness and reaches out for unity. And we align ourselves with that force, which we in our limited and longing way call God – we align ourselves with that force when we gather our wits about us, and roll up our sleeves, when we see beyond doctrine and ideology and race and class ...when we see beyond, to a place where our feet touch the earth and where the needs of our common humanity call more loudly than anything that would deny them.

When you go home today, or wherever it is you're going when you leave this place, go in Wisdom, with eyes to see the Holy One wherever you are; ears to hear the voice of Wisdom calling from the most unexpected places; and hearts open to the Goodness and Godness at the centre of everything.

Including you.

Amen.