

Christmas 2, Year A,

Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh

5th January, 2020

Sirach 24:1-12 NRSV / John 1:10-18 NRSV

We hear a lot this time of the year about light and word.

The “light of the world,” the “light that the darkness cannot overcome,”

“in the beginning was the Word,” the “Word made flesh,”

to name just a few.

Themes and metaphors of “light” are infused and completely intertwined

with the preparation of Advent,

culminating in the candlelight service

that transitions us to Christmas each year.

Often we have different themes and programming

for Advent and Christmas each year,

but we never really lose that symbolism and metaphor

of light and darkness, of Word becoming flesh.

On the surface, it doesn’t seem so complicated.

The Christmas story represents Jesus’ arrival in this world bringing hope and promise,

good news to those who had none.

There’s a sense that he brought something that was missing,

a connection to the Divine, that would, in the course of time,

bring about a resolution to the problems

of those who suffered here and now.

Certainly that is the whole meaning of gospel, or “good news,” and the “incarnation,” which is God appearing in human form.

Those are familiar terms and concepts for many of us.

However there is much more to these concepts of light and word if we look a little deeper into our lessons this morning.

In the very beginning of the creation story in Genesis,

we have darkness being broken by light.

God came into the darkness and created light to break up and overcome it.

God created light in the heavens to counter the darkness,

whether the sun by day or the stars and moon by night.

There is a sense of God’s created order

making sense of the negative chaos of darkness,

or the absence of God’s light.

But what exactly is the “light?”

When we hear “light,” most of us probably think in terms of illumination,

like the sun or the moon, or our own invention, light bulbs.

Those elements certainly drive away physical darkness and shadow.

But from a scriptural perspective, starting in Genesis,

there’s a sense of light bringing order to disorder and chaos.

God brings light and order to creation.

All is ordered according to the divine plan and the result is Eden, perfection.

Our texts this morning introduce a different dimension to God, a different face.

Our perception of God is often that of a fatherly figure,
usually with white hair and a long flowing beard.

Yet in Sirach, we are introduced to the Wisdom of God, a female persona.

Like our initial image of God in Genesis, Wisdom, or Sophia in Greek,
is portrayed as a mist covering the Earth,
penetrating into every corner, then a pillar of cloud,
mirroring the imagery from the Exodus story.

However, Wisdom is desperate for a home,
for a people in which to pitch her tent.

God gives her Israel as her home.

Jewish tradition and scholarship considers the Torah
to be the embodiment of the Wisdom persona of God.

God's covenant with the people in Sinai
was meant to bring them back into sync with the created order.

However, the drawback to God creating people in the divine image
is that they then also have free will.

They want to make things according to their design,
and soon strayed following their own interests, as they did in Eden.

Soon the law was viewed as a burden,
and the Wisdom it contained

was no longer recognized and acknowledged as valuable.

Likewise, in John, we have another image of the embodiment of this Wisdom persona

in “the Word.”

But to understand what that really means,

we need to take a closer look at what “word” means in this context.

For many, when they hear “Word” in this prologue to John,

they think of the written scripture.

And while the Bible certainly gives insight into “the Word,”

that is not what is being referred to.

In Greek, the scriptures are *biblos*, which is the word for book.

However, in John, what is translated as “word” is the Greek word *logos*.

Literally translated as “reason or plan,”

logos is the divine reason in creation,

ordering it and giving it form and meaning.

In other words, *logos* is the reason, or wisdom of God.

If we work with this definition, this first chapter of John makes a lot more sense.

It would only be natural for “the Word” to be with God from the beginning,

and through “the Word,” all that is was created.

And similar to our story of Wisdom from Sirach,

the Word also was ultimately rejected by most of his people.

Throughout scripture, there are those few

who recognized the importance of the wisdom in their midst,

but those prophets often also faced the same scorn.

John the Baptist is the example given in John.

However with the Word, not only truth and wisdom was embodied, but also grace.

When the people cast off and crucified the Word,
he sent yet another embodiment of Wisdom to the people,
in the form of the Spirit.

This act of grace made wisdom available
to the individual and the body of believers
without restriction or reliance on physical manifestation.

The last link in an unbroken chain of wisdom and truth since the very beginning.
The question is, do or will we avail ourselves of this wisdom so readily available to us?

We always seem to rely on ourselves for all the answers.

Yet where has that gotten us?

Are we any closer to being in sync with God's created order,
in any more in tune with God's wisdom and providence?

Or are we still stuck on our own chaotic path?

We have a choice.

We can keep marching to our own drummer
and keep finding ourselves coming up short,
or we can actually start paying attention to that still small voice,
the Spirit that so desperately wants to be among us,
to set up her tent within us.

And not just as individuals, but as a community of faith.

For too long, churches have mimicked
the same structure and concerns of the world around them,
catering to our own flawed logic of revenue and attendance,

building maintenance and keeping up appearances,
that the Spirit, the wisdom
has been relegated to the background,
or lost altogether.

We see the results just by looking around.

When the church no longer is much different than the world around them,
what purpose do they have,
why bother spending our time there
when there are other more engaging things to do
on a Sunday morning?

There's a story about Bible teacher F. B. Meyer

who once had a firewood factory that employed prisoners.

Meyer would give them a job to do, good wages, a place to live,
and when possible, spiritual encouragement.

In exchange, he expected them to render good employment.

They didn't work well together as a team, and he lost money.

Finally he fired them all and purchased a circular saw powered by a gas engine.

In one hour, it turned out more work

than the combined efforts of all the men covered

in the course of one day.

One day Meyer had a little conversation with his saw.

"How can you turn out so much work?" he asked.

"Are you sharper than the saws my men were using? No?"

Is your blade shinier? No? What then?

Better oil and lubrication against the wood?"

The saw's answer, could it speak, would have been,

"I think there is a stronger driving power behind me.

Something is working through me with a new force.

It is not I, it is the power behind."

Meyer later observed that many Christians and many ministers

are working in the power of the flesh,

in the power of their intellect,

their energy, their enthusiastic zeal,

but with poor effect.

They need to become linked to the power of God through the Holy Ghost."

How many of us does that apply to? I must confess it strikes home for me.

How often do we rely on ourselves, and our human limitations,

and miss opportunities because they don't make sense to us,

because they go against what we consider to be normal or rational?

This morning, let's reflect on how we as individuals, and as a faith community, can seek to be more Spirit-led, and less reliant on our own reason and intellect. What practices might we use to be more in tune with the Divine wisdom we are graced with? May we seek out Wisdom and Word in every aspect of our lives, and work together to bring each other back to the perfection of God's order. Amen.