

Most of us are familiar with the words of the Gospel of John – Ch. 1. Some of us even memorized it when we were young. Do you know it? *In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God,* Today is Trinity Sunday, and this is one way the Gospel writer asserts that Jesus was in the beginning with God. We are less familiar with Proverbs 8, which also talks about the beginning of creation.

Proverbs 8 stresses that God did not create the world in isolation. If you go back to Genesis 1:26, you notice a peculiar thing. God says, "*Let us create humankind in our image - male and female.*" I've had more than a few people ask me about that pronoun "us". Who does it refer to? Proverbs 8 is perhaps one answer. It acts like a midrash on Genesis 1:26, seeking to supply the voice of the one whose image resulted in the female half of humankind. Proverbs 8 communicates that wisdom was present with God at the beginning of creation, and she continues to be present not only with God but with humanity. Some scholars associate this mysterious figure of wisdom with the Word in the prologue to John's Gospel, as well as with the Holy Spirit, the Advocate in that same Gospel.

Wisdom is connected with something deeply imbedded in creation from the beginning, wiser than the hills and earth and fields: so primordial that it is not just a part of creation but a part of the process that brought creation about. God created wisdom, and created the world *by* wisdom. The word for wisdom in Hebrew is feminine. God created her first, before anything else was breathed into life. She reminds us that she, Wisdom, was there when everything was birthed. She was witness to it all. Wisdom was there *before* the covenant people were created, before there was Torah.

There is something Wisdom wants to tell us. Not only was she present when God created the world; she joined the Creator in rejoicing over and delighting over the inhabited world, in the whole human race. The first response to creation was not judgment; it was not despair. It was playful delight. When I think of Wisdom, I think of something elusive, something that has lived a few years and experienced life; like an old, wizened Indian in a cave in the desert. So it's surprising to find Wisdom in the busiest place in town. Wisdom standing in the doorways, at the crossroads where different paths meet. She is right at the entrance to the city. She is in the public places and not in some secluded place where secret teachings are shared with a select few. This teaching is for *everyone*, for her cry "*is to all that live*". It's as if she wants to make sure she doesn't miss anyone. She's indiscriminate, offering her companionship to all. Wisdom offers humanity access to the living God. In many cultures, Wisdom is a cherished attribute, but in our culture, the media emphasizes other attributes – youth, vitality, wealth, fame, success. It does so because those things "sell" in our world. But when you scratch below the surface, you realize that what people really want in the world is wisdom--practical insight on how to understand the world and to live well. And wisdom is needed at all levels of society--from those who counsel the President, to those who serve on corporate boards of directors, to those who raise children, and for those who are attempting to clean up a horrific oil spill. This text is an inspiration for cultivating a spiritual practice that is much neglected in our frantic, technologically driven, preoccupied world: paying attention to creation in order to gain wisdom and deepen our relationship with God. Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to consider ways to connect with God to receive wisdom in our lives. She writes of 12 different ways that we might encounter God in our everyday lives, including practices like walking on the earth (groundedness), paying attention (reverence), getting lost (wilderness), and waking up to God (vision). "*Wisdom is not gained by knowing what is right. Wisdom is gained by practicing what is right, and noticing what happens when that practice succeeds and when it fails. Wise people do not have to be certain what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice itself will teach them what*

*they need to know."*

So how do we attain such wisdom? I sometimes quip that I am thankful for this appointment, because I have discovered the fountain of youth right here at Sand Point. But the reality is, I have also discovered the fountain of wisdom. Soon after the death of the greatest rabbi in the region, a traveler said to one of his disciples, *"Your rabbi was renowned for his wisdom. To what did he give greatest attention to in life?"* The disciple thought a minute and said: *"To whatever he happened to be doing at the moment."*

Wisdom, in other words, is the gift of living the present to the utmost and learning from the now whatever we will need to respond with integrity to whatever our future brings. Wisdom, the Scripture requires us to understand, is the craft of taking all the learnings of our past and our present and be willing to be guided by them into the future. Wisdom calls us to know ourselves. Wisdom leads us from one point to another in life until we learn what we're supposed to learn, until we do what we're supposed to do, until we each become what we're supposed to become.

*"Holy One, what is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?"* the disciple asked. And the Holy One answered: *"When you have knowledge, you use a torch to show the way. When you are wise, you become the torch."* Those who follow God down circuitous paths wherever life steers become a torch for others. The book of Proverbs reminds all of us again that life is a series of unending changes bred by the demands of the present and nourished by a faithful past for the sake of a faithful future. As time goes by two things become more and more apparent: first, that life is a process, a journey, not a place. And secondly, it is wisdom that leads us there. Paul, in the book of Romans, alludes to other attributes, but they are also related to wisdom: *"We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character."* Isn't there a less painful way to produce endurance and character and hope? There are folks who have a lot of personality but they are short in character and wisdom. Suffering and learning how to handle suffering cannot be learned from the pages in a book but only can be learned from living the painful chapters in our lives. Wisdom is the commitment to go on.