

**Sermon: Wisdom Personified**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18**

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet, as many of them were. He tells us that he was only a boy when the word of the Lord came to him. He was active during the final years of the seventh century BCE and right up to the exile to Babylon in 586. He died soon after that, presumably in Egypt where some of the Judean leaders went when the Babylonian army came through Jerusalem.

He was there when Judah disappeared as a political entity and when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. Through it all, Jeremiah insisted that there would be a future for the people in Judah, even after the conquest. Today's reading is a prophecy of hope during a very dark time of judgement and upheaval.

God's judgement is not just about God getting even with us for something we did. Men and women can and will do things that diminish their humanity. We are often punished as much *by* our sins as we are punished *for* them. But God will not give up on us. The story told by Jeremiah proves this – as bad as the people let things get, God was there to lift them up and restore them. Jeremiah said: “Thus says the Lord: here's a word of hope in the midst of exile.”

John the Evangelist had an entirely different Word in mind, and his Word was ancient. He used the term *logos*, which had its own long history before he used it. The rabbis related *logos* to the Torah, and, over time, *logos* came to be associated with wisdom – which is *sophia* in Greek and *hokma* in Hebrew.

A literal translation of John's first verse would go like this:

In the beginning was the Word [λόγος],  
and the Word was with God,  
and *God* was the Word.

For John, ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us.’ This is new stuff. No one had ever suggested that God might dwell among us. For King David, God lived in a tent. Mostly, people knew God lived in heaven. For John, words have deep meaning.

In this sense, reading literal translations can be instructional. The literal version of verse five goes like this: ‘The light in the darkness shines, and the darkness did not *grasp it.*’ That feels different than ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not *overcome* it.’

If it’s completely dark, and the light shines, the darkness is dispelled and goes away, and the darkness doesn’t know what hit it. For John, Jesus is the light of all people, and even though there will be dark forces arrayed against him, they don’t yet know that they have already lost.

We can argue that though the sacred texts of Judaism tell the history of the Jewish people, the Bible speaks to anyone with ears to hear. One case in point is the self-praise of Wisdom in Sirach, who says that Wisdom is universal, available to anyone.

In Scripture, Wisdom is always personified as a woman, and she’s bold and brassy and she has things to say, so we ought to listen up. We can find passages about Wisdom in Proverbs, chapter 8, and in Job, chapter 28.

Here, Wisdom tells us that “Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be” (Sirach 24:9).

Compare that to Proverbs, where Wisdom says, “The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be” (Proverbs 8:22-23, NIV).

So, when John wrote, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being,” was he drawing inspiration from Sirach and Proverbs? Or was he just stating the obvious?

In Job, the question is asked, ‘where can Wisdom be found (28:12)?’ The answer there is, ‘in the fear of the Lord,’ with ‘fear’ meaning respect and reverence. Sirach, though, tells us that we can find Wisdom in the Temple and in the *people* of the Lord.

Proverbs tells us that ‘to fear the Lord is to hate evil (8:13)’ and that ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom (9:10)’. It seems clear that God put all this into motion and that everything stems from God, and that God deserves our fear and praise.

We’re all aware that last year was a bear, and not just because of Covid. It all started when Georgia beat Baylor in the Sugar Bowl.

We saw floods and landslides in Indonesia, earthquakes in Puerto Rico, and a volcano in the Philippines. The Red Sox fired Alex Cora. That was all just in January.

Then there were locusts in East Africa; wildfires in Australia; murder hornets in Washington state, and a record number of tropical storms and hurricanes in the Atlantic. A black hole a bazillion miles away even blew up; 2020 just wouldn't let up.

The other day, on New Year's Day night, Jody and I were walking along Nantasket Beach boulevard, talking about all the people we have prayed for during the past year, and all the people on today's prayer list. And we realized first that it's a long list, but from week to week, there's always someone who needs a prayer. Sometimes, that's all we can give. Sometimes, all we can do is to ask God for help.

So where is the Good News? The world still resists knowing God. The world may have come into being through Jesus, but the world did not know him. Maybe we've been in the darkness for too long and our eyes need to adjust in the light.

Living in the darkness allows us to not see what needs to be seen, and that can be comfortable and comforting. Living in the light means we can see and understand everything going on around us, even if it's not pretty and we want to turn away.

We're asked to choose one or the other. It's not enough that God became known to us through the incarnation of Jesus. It's not enough that God lived and walked among us. God wants us to know why this was done. Do we want Jesus to dispel the darkness in us, and give us life, or are we okay with not knowing him?

God created the heavens and the earth and everything in between, and now John says the *logos* brings life to God's creation. 'What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of *all* people' (1:3b-4).

There is a strong theme of life and light in John's Gospel. Any artist will tell you that light creates warmth and brings out all the details and color in what we see.

Deciding to live in the light as a faith community can be challenging. It means calling attention to things that others might not want to see. It means standing together as men and women in the light. It means choosing to come to the Table as we are, warts and all – if any – as welcome guests ready to receive the gifts of grace and truth. And it means letting Wisdom take root in us to help us meet the challenge. Amen.

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