

What (or Who) Is Wisdom?

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My formal name, if I were being asked to speak at a fancy conference or something, would be the Rev. Dr. Rebecca L. Kiser. In very ultra correct English, Reverend is a descriptive word, not a title, kinda like when we formally refer to our congresspeople as the Honorable John Doe. Most folks just say Rev. Kiser, or Pastor Becky. That is my relationship to folks here – I’m the church pastor. HOWEVER, there are other aspects of who I am and relationships I have that name me other things and experience me other ways. I’m just “Becky” to my friends outside of church - they know I’m a minister, but I’m not their minister. To my bank, I’m a client. To my doctor, I’m a patient. To my neighbor, I’m that awful person with a cat who likes to chase birds. The folks at Wal-Mart probably don’t know me from Adam. To the other clergy in town, I’m a colleague. My children call me MOM, with all the attendant attitudes of teenagers and young adults. They’ve known me in ways others don’t, and we have shaped each other. To my own mom, I was a daughter; to my younger sister, I’m her older sister and recipient of all the attendant feelings. For almost 20 years I was a wife, although I probably can’t say in church what he calls me now. Different people in different relationships with me know different aspects of my totality.

So why should our relationships to the God of the universe be any less complex? Why should our experiences of God be only one-dimensional, and the same for everyone, one-size-fits-all? God is immense beyond our comprehension, yet also in the most miniscule detail; God’s creativity and self is expressed in a vast abundance of lifeforms and creations; how can we try and straightjacket God into a single experience?

Our Holy Scriptures refer to many and widely varied experiences of people with God – from visions to deliverance. From talking to judging; from thought-provoking stories to sublime poetry; from tears and sorrow to wild dancing and laughter.

Our Bible contains lots more images and metaphors for God than the official, orthodox Trinitarian formula. I’ve seen a poster that is absolutely full of the names used for God in the Bible – in the end, God is indefinable in human thought and language, so we end up using lots of them to try and capture the hugeness, the awesome enormity, the variety of experiences that make up our story with God. Ancient of Days; Alpha & Omega (the 1st & last letters of the Greek alphabet, ie, the first & the last); the Anointed One, Advocate, Prince of Peace, King of Kings, creator, Maker, Bread of Life, the branch from the stump of Jesse, the bright morning star, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, Wonderful Counselor, Christ, Cornerstone, Dayspring, Good Shepherd, the Gate for the sheep, Great

High Priest, Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Logos or Word, Light of the World, Master, Messiah, Redeemer, Refiner, Rock, Rose of Sharon, Sun of Righteousness, Son of Man, Son of God, Son of Mary, Son of David, the Way, the Truth, the Life, Vine.....OK, so I got some help from some alphabetical lists.... and this wasn't even all the names.

In the text we read from Proverbs on the figure of Wisdom, you'll notice in your Bibles that the "W" is capitalized as a name, and Wisdom is pictured as a woman calling out to people to come to her and find Wisdom. We call several books of the Protestant Old Testament the Wisdom books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs; and in the Catholic Bible there is also a book called the Wisdom of Solomon – you remember he was known for his wisdom. People who study world religions often talk about the "wisdom traditions" within various religious traditions – the Sufi tradition within Islam, for example; and the later, mystical Kabbalah tradition within Judaism that the entertainer Madonna has brought to more awareness. The figure of Woman Wisdom, or Lady Wisdom some people write – or in Greek, Sophia was a part of this. One of the famous cathedrals to Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, is in Istanbul, a great architectural wonder of the world, now a museum.

Several folks who have studied Holy Wisdom in both Proverbs & the Wisdom of Solomon, where there are ore chapters about her, have noticed a great correlation between what is said of her and what is said of Christ, especially in the book of John, who likes to wax philosophical already. Much of what is said in John's opening prologue about the Word was taken from what is said in other places about Holy Wisdom – in fact, he refers to Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God.

This personification of Wisdom as a figure that was with God even as far back as the creation is an intriguing figure – playful, joyful, and pictured as calling out to all people out at the corner of 1st & Main, as one translator puts it. And she's an interesting counterpoint to the other female figure in Proverbs, that wicked woman who calls out to all the foolish people to follow her instead.

Its neat to read about Holy Wisdom on Trinity Sunday, because it emphasizes that God can't be captured by any one definition, one experience, one perspective, one interpretation. Rather, God comes to each of us in the way we need in order to hear, to respond. Certainly Jesus' talk about God was astounding in his day – the image of God as a Father was very rare in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the approachable "Abba", which is more like poppa or daddy than the stern, Victorian "Father" we say with lowered and respectful voice. Jesus, in his special relationship to God, used an intimate and familial word for God to explain his unique relationship with God – Abba and child.

We've always noticed that some people seem to respond more to certain ways of worship, and people also gravitate to different ways of prayer and study. We've kinda taken those preferences into denominations, so there's a group here that prefers a more outwardly

demonstrative and emotional kind of worship, and a group there that prefers and more structured worship with direct ties to tradition and historical practices. There's a group that writes out their prayers and a group that prefers to pray spontaneously. There're those who are comfortable raying out loud in words, and those whose prayer life is more inner and silent, and perhaps even wordless contemplation. Some are drawn to a deeply ritualized lifestyle, and find themselves drawn to a monastery experience of prayer for all people. Others are drawn to a life of activism, and might wear a t-shirt like a friend of mine that says, "Sweat Your Prayers," and build Habitat Houses perhaps, or go to disaster locations to work. There's room for all of us – and God calls to all of us. All of us find God in some ways more easily than others; and we often look down on the folks who prefer the opposite of ourselves: because it's so hard for us to find God there, we think they can't possibly be finding God, either. But they are.

So it makes sense that God would seek us out in as many ways and experiences as possible, doesn't it? Our faith ancestors got into lots of discussion (and arguments) trying to explain just how God can be both three and one, with final orthodox words having to do with essence and substance and person, each used in highly defined ways. It can be confusing, and those outside Christianity have often accused us of polytheism – having three Gods instead of just one God. I just think of it as all being God, reaching out to us in infinite means. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit, as commanded in the book of Matthew – but I think its just a reminder that God is eventually so much different from humanity that we can only see (see!) and know certain aspects, and we should never be tempted to think we've put God in the box of our own limited understanding.

AMEN.