

## Proper 9 Year A 2023

There are many ways to speak of God...all of them metaphorical, of course. In the Quran, the sacred scripture of Islam, it is said that God has ninety nine names, proposing that there are in truth infinite ways to express what we know of the divine One. The church as an institution says that God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but I would say that those are first words, not by any means the last words, because God is forever revealing Godself... in our experience, in our learning, in conversations, in our imaginations. If God is truly all in all, then all things of creation might serve as a means of divine encounter.

“In the beginning was the mother God.” So begins Jane Harrison’s brilliant book entitled *Themis*, in which she studies the pre-historic religions of the Mediterranean Basin. Her focus is between 7000 and 8000 B.C. E., before the demise of matrilineal culture in that part of the world. Mother, father, of course are metaphors projected onto God by the human imagination. Religion always reflects the cultural ethos within which it lives and moves, so the iconography of that era was decidedly female. Female statues of the mother God in this period were far more ubiquitous than male iconography. Thousands of years before Christianity, the Madonna and child appeared: The mother God protecting and nurturing the God-child. Fertility

rites of course were the earliest forms of worship....water rites... rites remembering the amniotic truth of our beginnings, our mortality, and our capacity for transformation., rites depicting the cycle of birth and death.

Sometime during the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E. matrilineal culture met its demise, and patriarchal culture came into a position of dominance. The ruling Gods became men....organized warfare became an art....the Mother God was demoted to a lesser role....fertility rites became rites of appeasing the war-like and angry pantheon....the Earth Mother goddess was now imprisoned in a lonely tower lost in a forgotten landscape of the collective human psyche.... her worship was repressed, made taboo....Jane Harrison writes, “The anthropomorphic male gods of the Mediterranean (YHWH being one of them) seemed to me like a bouquet of cut flowers whose bloom is brief because they have been severed from their roots.” And these male gods withdrew from creation....hidden among the mountain tops only to appear rarely, and to a few....they ascended into a palace in the sky, into a hierarchical new order....ruling from the top down....lording their power over creation.

There is a Persian myth of the fourth millennium B.C.E. wherein Mardok, the God of the Sun, murders his Queen Mother....the goddess now banished....buried....and now the rise of empire on the horizon, top down

power personified....Egypt....Assyria....Babylon....Persia....Greece and Rome, and then fast forward into our own time....Our God now a conquering warrior, great and mighty, omniscient, omnipotent....women and children, considered less powerful, in the Ancient near east of the first century of the Common Era, women now of little value, pushed to the margins....two thirds of populations enslaved....the goddess gone and the motherless creation awash in patriarchal hubris.

But the goddess never really went away.... Her worship mostly was within the mystic traditions over the centuries... sometimes referred to as “occult” by the institutional church... But we in fact see, if we look closely, throughout scripture, her presence, woven intricately into the recesses of God’s word told and retold and written down over the sweep of the ages. New Testament scholar, Ellen Davis, proposes that when God speaks in Genesis, saying let us make humankind in our own image, male and female; God is speaking to the goddess, Wisdom. Throughout scripture we hear her speak....a distant but strong voice, reverberating over the deep as it was in the beginning... gentle but sure...like a mother’s voice....Hear her in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, “I came forth and covered the earth as a mist. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over the waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people

and nation I have held sway .... I took root in an honored people and loved them.” This is the goddess, the figure of Wisdom, the divine Sophia, literally creating the world. (in our own bible) According to the scribe of Proverbs she is the one, not Yahweh, who delivers Israel from the Egyptians, and it is she who leads them by cloud in the daylight and by fire at night during the sojourn of Israel in the Sinai desert. According to the text of *Enoch* a first century manuscript from the community at Qumran, just east of Jerusalem (one of the Dead Sea scrolls)... “At the Resurrection Wisdom shall arise from her place in heaven and give herself to the just...then she shall also be the judge of the whole earth.” And again in Proverbs, “Come eat the bread I have baked and drink the wine I have mixed...lay aside immaturity and live.”... Echoes of the Eucharist and its prevailing rubric of hospitality.

And so we come to our reading today from Matthew’s gospel, and we hear Jesus say.... “Come unto me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart”.... This is in fact a quote from Ecclesiasticus that Matthew has Jesus recite....a quote from none other than Wisdom herself...the words of the ancient goddess on the lips of Jesus, God’s anointed. Matthew has Jesus speaking in the first person on behalf of

the Mother God, inviting those who would hear to learn of her ways...and perhaps more importantly, unlearn the ways of empire and patriarchy.

In just a century before the birth of Christianity Cicero lamented that the gods of the pantheon never “did anything”... that they were aloof on Olympus.... Indeed our prayer to God is often, “Do something!” Plato had coined the term for the monotheistic God, “The unmoved mover.”... like the God of the Deists at the rise of modernity... this was a God set apart from the creation, a God wholly other....setting the creation loose to fend for itself... foundering under a burdensome system of dogma and belief.... As modernity came into its own, Nietzsche declared this God dead and gone, irrelevant to the enlightened mind.

Matthew is calling on the ancient tradition of the goddess personified in Jesus, so that God can be spoken of as among us; God immanent in creation... Wisdom does things, like a mother does things: She creates, she teaches, she feeds and nurtures, she heals....she liberates....she stands at the city gates and calls out corruption and injustice.....and despite being rejected...as Jesus will be rejected, despite being rejected, she persists for the good...as any Mother would.... So, as the gospels are about imitation, that is what we must do brothers and sisters. We persist in the good, resist evil... persist in love.... Not so much because it's what we believe... but

because it's what we do. Faith is not so much a matter of belief; rather, faith is about meaningful participation in the life we have been given. Faith is commitment to a way of life. Faith, in short, is about presence. If I ever write a book, the title will be... *The Art of Presence*.

“Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” Matthew writes.... What will change the world my brothers and sisters are the deeds of our faith....all of us sons and daughters of Wisdom with our brother Jesus of Galilee....all of us bearing God's ‘doing life’... that is the way of Wisdom, the way of the Christ and those who would follow....We can argue over creeds, confessions, theology, and so-called right belief until we are blue in the face....but it will be our doing, our moving over creation....To use Annie Dillard's words, moving over creation in “extravagant gesture”.... It will be our doing, our enlightened acting out of conscience that will be the salvation of our world. If we say that Jesus is Savior, it is only so in light of those who follow Jesus, the movement he engendered... following the way of Wisdom... doing something... And salvation is communal, not personal. As long as any of God's children languish on the margins of existence, we languish with them...One person's indignity is our indignity. One person's plight for well-being is our plight for well-being.

Matthew depicts Jesus here as the personification of Holy Wisdom. He says he is *humble* of heart....the word for humble in Greek means much more than it does in English....in fact, the word, *πραυς*, (humble or meek) is held by the Hellenistic philosophical schools as a cardinal virtue suited for a King, or as the case may be, a queen....The word means selfless; empathetic; balanced, gentle; forbearing; compassionate; merciful, just; and... courageous...That is, I would propose, a description of our true humanity, our true nature into which the life of faith leads us.... Ironically, a life that has always been, it's is sad to say, counter-cultural. But that is the manner of life we are called to practice... a manner of life in which we are called to persist.

The church now in our culture across denominational lines is in steep decline... My theory is that to a great degree it has succumbed to its institutional self-interest; and insisted on a narrow and dogmatic system of belief that in many cases defies believability; such is the way of institutions.... But it is our nature to desire purpose and meaning; it is our nature to want to make a difference in our lives of faith... and more than that, people want to become themselves, to know themselves more deeply. Jesus is teaching us that the life of faith, lived out in community is not only the way to know God, but also the way to know ourselves and each other ....

The imagery in this passage is beguiling: We people are “like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” This is an invitation into the fullness of life’s mystery... into the music and dance of God. It is an invitation to be present to the world. It is an invitation to love as God loves.

So it seems to me that the question for the post-modern church is this: Shall our faith be a public faith? Shall we make it our life’s work? Shall we make it the place wherein we find joy? Shall we embrace the Wisdom of our tradition? Shall we offer our presence in the public square and stand for justice and truth?...Shall we call out violence as no legitimate means of peace....Shall we stand in the marketplace and call out insatiable consumption as the false God that it is...Shall we call for the healing of our sick, a just allocation of care....Shall we call for the care of our warming planet.... Shall we stand for the welcome of all people to our land no matter their background? Shall we stand for a humane prison system that is about correction and rehabilitation, not punishment and profit.... Shall we stand for a system of shared wealth, so that all may participate in God’s abundance... Shall we finally defeat the demon of racism that infects every aspect of our culture? Jesus was crucified because he called out the ways of



Empire as demeaning and false. Shall we stand for the kingdom of God in the face of the competing empires of our world? Do we dare make such an extravagant gesture?

Yes... Yes is the answer, because that is who we are and what we do. Love is that for which we were made.... the extravagant gesture for our world is the love of God, for which we were born to bear in our very bodies... We have the capacity for such an extravagant gesture.... Because we were made for love... and Love does things... Love sacrifices; love heals; love welcomes; love builds up, love rights wrongs... and to be in love is to be well and whole with souls at rest. Belief is a life-long, evolving enterprise, changing and speculative, and worthy of our imaginative conversations and inquiry... But Love; Love is God's extravagant gift.... And Love never waits... Love is for now.

The world is falling apart, just as it ever has... The powerful continue to abuse the powerless, and it would be easy to hide in indifference, particularly in our privilege... but we, good people, are called to be present to a broken world, to engage its extravagant complexity, its beauty and squalor; its sorrow and joy. The music, sometimes in a minor key invites us. Our presence will make a difference. We'll never know the end of our labors, but we will know the good and the true along the way. The invitation

to take on the yoke of Jesus still stands, and still stands with the same urgency. The way of Jesus, the ancient way of wisdom is the road we are destined to travel. It is a road that requires a predisposition of gratitude. It requires a mother's sacrifice... and perhaps most of all, a mother's courage. It requires our doing something. Many won't choose this way.... but know that we will find rest for our souls; and praise... an abundance of praise.... And that is worth everything.