

God's Wisdom & Word Dwell with Us

Sirach 24:1-12 & John 1:1-18

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January 4, 2015

2nd Sunday of Christmas



One of my major tasks for this weekend has been setting up my daily planner for 2015 with each month organized into weeks, each week organized into days and each day organized into hours that quickly fill with Bible study, preaching preparation, pastoral visits, meetings and the like. My daily planner is specially designed for pastors, so it also highlights the church year — the liturgical calendar that determines what I'm reading and studying at

any given time. I am intrigued by the way the church year runs alongside and overlaps with the secular calendar but is almost always slightly out of synch. Today is the first Sunday of 2015, yet it is also the second Sunday of Christmas, and the tenth day of the Christmas season — the day associated with ten lords a-leaping. For the world around us Christmas has come and gone, yet here in the church we still wait the coming of the wise men, and the celebration of Epiphany, a.k.a. Three Kings Day.

My planner marks the passage of chronological time: discrete moments and events in my daily life. The church year does something different. We celebrate Christmas not as a day on a calendar, but as a season because the coming of Christ is more than just a moment in history, it is the beginning of an ongoing process — a process that is described in our Scripture lessons for this second Sunday of Christmastide.

Our first lesson is the “alternate” text for this Sunday drawn from an ancient Jewish book called the “The Wisdom of Sirach.” It was written by a man named Yeshua ben Sirach who taught biblical studies, religion and ethics at an academy for young men in Jerusalem about two hundred years before the birth of Christ. The Wisdom of Sirach was well-known in the world of Jesus, was included in the Scriptures of the early church and remains Scripture for our Orthodox and Catholic brothers and sisters. You won't find it in most Protestant Bibles unless they include a section called the *Aprocrypha*. I've included it in today's readings because the ideas expressed in Sirach were foundational for the writers of the New Testament as they tried to describe who Jesus was and why his coming was and is so important.

What we have in Sirach 24:1-12 is a poem in which Wisdom tells of her glory. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for wisdom are feminine nouns and so God's Wisdom is always personified as female. Here she describes (1) her origin as coming forth from the mouth of God as the spoken word, (2) her presence throughout the cosmos: covering the earth like a mist and

enthroned in a pillar of cloud, i.e. hidden in, with and under nature's wonders, encircling the vault of heaven and walking in the depths of the abyss, (3) her presence among every people and nation throughout all of history from before the ages and beyond the age to come, and (4) her search for a resting place, a territory in which to abide. By God's command Wisdom pitched her tent in the midst of the people of Israel, serving God's mission in the desert tabernacle and in the Jerusalem Temple.



In Sirach 24 we hear allusions to the creation poem of Genesis 1, and to the story of Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. Sirach's poetry expresses God's presence, albeit hidden, in every time and place, among every people and nation, and even more so, articulates God's yearning to pitch God's tent and dwell with God's people.

Our second lesson from the Gospel of John was written sixty years after the birth of Christ. It takes the form of a prose poem that takes us back to the opening verse of Genesis: in the beginning. We hear the story of the Word — the speech — which in the beginning was with God, was God, and through which everything that exists came into being. This Word was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. It didn't even notice him (verse 10). Even when the Word came to God's people it was not accepted (verse 11). They didn't want him. Now at this point in the story we might expect to hear that the Word gave up and went back to heaven. But no! Instead the Word did something completely unexpected: he became flesh and lived among us (verse 14). The original Greek says that the Word *pitched his tent* among us.



John is telling the same story Sirach told but with a new twist. Wisdom and Word both refer to God's longing to abide among God's people. In Sirach, Wisdom finds a temporary home in tabernacle and temple. In John's Gospel the Word finds a permanent home by becoming flesh, becoming a human being just like us, in the person of Jesus Christ. The best part is that anyone who receives him, who believes in his name will be given the power to become children of God (verse 12). Or as Eugene Petersen puts it in *The Message*:

But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, he made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.

This is the reason for the season. Jesus moves into our neighborhood, so that as we welcome, accept and receive him into our lives we will become the persons God yearns for us to be: our true selves, our child-of-God selves. This true self is not born of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man. In other words, our true self is not defined by things like gender, sexuality, race, size, social or economic status. Our true self is not defined by our upbringing, interests, successes and triumphs, definitely not by our failures and tragedies. Our true self is not defined by the bad things that have happened to us or that we have done in the past. Our true self, our child-of-God self is still in the making, yet to be revealed in the light of Christ shining in the darkness of our confusion and fear, our pain and grief, our disappointments and tragedies.

This is why Christmas is not just the celebration of a unique moment in historical time. It is the beginning of an ongoing process that will continue not just throughout the coming year but throughout our entire lives. So as we pause in this moment at the intersection of Christmas, the New Year and Epiphany I would like to invite each of you to take up a spiritual discipline. Once every day I would like you to look in the mirror and say these words, "I am a child of God, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference in the world today." Say these words with me now: I am a child of God, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference in the world today. Repeat them every day for the rest of this month. If for some reason you have difficulty doing this: call, text, email or stop by my office and I'll set you straight.

Please pray with me: Holy Wisdom, Divine Word made flesh in a manger long ago we welcome you into our community and into our lives today. Help us grow into our true child-of-God selves. Amen.