

Sermon: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 (Trinity Sunday C)
Christ Church Riverdale, 30 May 2010
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Proverbs 8:1 Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? ²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; ³beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: ⁴"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. ²²The Lord created me at the beginning* of his work,* the first of his acts of long ago. ²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. ²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. ²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth— ²⁶when he had not yet made earth and fields,* or the world's first bits of soil. ²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, ²⁸when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, ²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;* and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, ³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

The United States has been blessed by a large number of service clubs--Rotary, Kiwanis, Woman's Clubs, Optimists, just to name a few. I'm told that once a group of pessimists considered forming a club, too. "If the optimists have a club, why can't we?" The conversation went on for some time, considering what the requirements would be, when the meetings would take place, etc. Finally one of the pessimists broke in: "Oh come on; it'll never work!"

In the reading from Proverbs we hear the divine wisdom speaking, and as usual in the Bible, God's wisdom is personified as a beautiful, righteous woman. (By contrast, when the Bible personifies folly, it's as a prostitute!) When it comes to wisdom, our own culture has a divided mind and I don't find either viewpoint to be particularly healthy. Probably the prevailing mindset is, "Who has time for wisdom?" In our fast-paced electronic age we are drowning in data, but the kind of quiet patient reflection that leads to wisdom? Forget about it! But there is also a kind of awe of wisdom in our culture precisely because so few people pursue it. There are people who make the effort to unplug and seek after this esoteric concept of wisdom, often importing it from another cultural tradition. This kind of wisdom is a rarified thing that only the elite have access to.

What we heard from Proverbs is very different: Wisdom is calling out to everybody, everywhere you can think of! "On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out." This is not wisdom for the elite, but for everyone, a wisdom that goes on to tell the story of how she permeates the creation:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work. . . . When there were no depths I was brought forth . . . [b]efore the mountains . . . before the hills, . . . When [the Lord] established the heavens, I was there. . . . I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

Now there is a tradition of conventional wisdom, which has its value, having been sifted through the ages. Conventional wisdom usually says that things are the way they are for good reason, and it's difficult or even unwise to try to change them. If we're not careful, conventional wisdom can look a lot like the Pessimists' Club. God's wisdom is all about reaching out all about the good of humanity, though, not just individuals.

I didn't live in New York in the late 1970s but a lot of you did. My understanding of conventional wisdom when it came to the South Bronx in the late 70s could be stated in two words--get out! If you could afford to, get out! It was a neighborhood being shredded by violence and crime, a neighborhood being abandoned by institutions and where city services were being reduced, a neighborhood where arson was rampant. The Pessimists' Club had a growing membership, and with good reason. Thanks be to God there were some who didn't follow conventional wisdom and get out, who refused to join the Pessimists' Club. One group that formed around a vision was the South Bronx Churches, including our fellow Episcopalians--a group that has brought quality affordable housing and greater stability and quality of life.

Another group formed around a vision of quality health care, and more than 30 years ago Christ Church parishioner Verona Greenland Pinion, who thought she would work in public health in the developing world, instead became the founder of the Morris Heights Health Center. As I said, institutions were pulling out of the South Bronx at that time, not starting up. And yet when you consider that tens of thousands of people made in God's image live in Morris Heights, if you delight in the human race like God's wisdom does, how could it be wise to do anything other than help? The Morris Heights Health Center has a history of impressive achievements with Verona at the helm. It has grown from a storefront to 5 locations, with yet another under construction, offering a full array of primary and specialty care. More important than the number or size of buildings has been the central conviction that low income does not have to mean substandard medical care. To give one example: infant mortality in the area served by the Center has dropped over 75% in 20 years.

This is a way that God's wisdom is inherently practical--the wisdom that refuses to cut and run, but has courage and stamina and focus. God's wisdom can't be bought and sold, and it takes time to receive--there are no shortcuts or gimmicks. But we also don't have to import it from somewhere else, it's right here in Judaeo-Christian tradition, and like Verona, we don't have to go anywhere else to live it. God's wisdom is here, in the creation, calling out to us from everywhere we can imagine. All we need to do is listen, truly listen, and allow our hearts and minds to be led into how we are called to live God's wisdom out in our own circumstances. It may not be as dramatic as founding the Morris Heights Health Center, but in God's eyes our calls are no less important.