

PELICANS

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15

Last month's edition of *The Lutheran* magazine included a disturbing bit of reporting. It seems there has been a survey taken which concludes that the better we are educated, the less likely we are to revere the Ten Commandments. The article that reported this was badly done, leaving the reader to guess what it is the learned don't like about the Ten Commandments. I suspect that it is not the wisdom of the Ten Commandments that the learned reject—after all most of these rules for living together are present in almost all societies on the planet in one form or another and beneficial. What is questioned, in all probability, is the biblical *story* of how the Commandments were transmitted by God to Moses on the mountaintop for the exclusive benefit of the people Israel. What the learned probably do not believe is that this story records an actual historical event that occurred on a certain day in a certain place in the lives of certain people. But I'm just guessing, because, as I say, the article was not well-done.

The Lutheran, of course, is a church magazine intended to be read by people of faith who are inclined to think of the Commandments as divine law. But what should such people conclude from this article on the Ten Commandments and the learned? That learning is bad for faith? That faith and learning are at odds? This is certainly one conclusion that might be drawn, though I hope we are not the sort of Christians who would draw it. It does not seem to me that faith suffers from too much learning. Quite

the contrary in fact. But it may also be that learning that is without faith does not have the understanding and sound judgment which are the marks of wisdom.

In the Book of Proverbs, we read that wisdom was God's first creation. This wisdom is personified as feminine, Lady Wisdom, and named Sophia. In our reading for today, we see her as created before the mountains had been shaped, when God had not yet made earth and fields, before God assigned to the sea its limit and set the foundations of the earth. All of this is to say that God creates wisely; there is order to the creation which is what science studies. Some have wished to make something of the feminine gender in which wisdom is cast in Proverbs, but I think this is a mistake, inasmuch as it is the wisdom of God who is conceived as male and who as Creator is superior to "his" creation, and this brings us back to the perennial problem of thinking of the female as subordinate to the male. That is hardly something to which we should want to return. But the idea of God's wisdom in Proverbs and elsewhere is important.

We are approaching the summer solstice, but go back with me to the time of the winter solstice so that we may see what becomes of the idea of God's wisdom in the Christian faith. On Christmas morning, we are told in our Gospel that the word has become flesh and dwells among us full of grace and truth. The Word is nothing more nor less than the wisdom of God, the expression of God's mind as our words express our minds. And the Word becomes flesh. Whose flesh? Jesus' flesh. The most considered understanding of who Jesus is for Christians is that Jesus is the Word of God, the wisdom of God. I am certainly not without sympathy for fans of Lady Wisdom who feel that the feminine has here been hijacked by a male Jesus. But we have to get beyond this, and far enough beyond this that the maleness of Jesus is no longer a factor; so that we understand

the wisdom of God as dwelling in all of the creation as well as in the life and teachings of Jesus. Indeed, the wisdom of God is revealed in more than the inhabited world and the human race. The wisdom of God speaks through the entirety of nature, through the mountains and through the sea and soil and air and through all the other creatures with which we humans share this planet.

As we are gathered here for worship, oil continues to flow into the Gulf of Mexico from the BP oil rig disaster, flows and flows and flows, and who knows if there is anything that can be done to stop this flow? We have in this flowing oil a most graphic display of human un-wisdom. Less graphic but more devastating is the system of energy use and production of which the disaster in the Gulf is but a moment. We can see the oil in the water and as it comes ashore. What we do not see is the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which is already past the threshold of 350 parts per million determined bearable by atmospheric scientists. The long-time environmentalist, Bill McKibbon's new book (*Eaarth*) tells us that we are already past the point where saving the Earth for our grandchildren is possible and that we are right now standing in our grandchildren's shoes. Though he believes we must do everything we can to shift our economy to renewable resources, he points out that even if we were to build two million large windmills every year for the next 40 years—four times as many windmills as we built in the year 2007—this would only offset one-ninth of the carbon output necessary to make our planet resemble the one into which my generation was born. McKibbon does not believe that we can “grow” our way out of this situation as many would like us to think, as if we can just keep on doing what we have been doing except doing it smarter

and bigger. He thinks that we will have no choice but to change the way that we live, whatever else may be done to change our technology.

In the face of all this bad news, what does the wisdom of God tell us? It tells us what it has always told us—that we are the creatures of God whose creation is good. But also that however much God rejoices in the inhabited world and delights in the human race, that we human beings are part of the natural world, inseparable from all the other creatures forming the vast and complex ecosystem that is planet Earth; and that this fact is not something that we can take for granted any longer with six billion plus human beings living on the planet. We will either voluntarily change our ways to fit better the nature of which we are a part, or we will be forced to change by the changes in nature that are already occurring.

On the front page of the newspaper last Monday was a picture of an oil-covered Pelican whose habitat is the Gulf of Mexico. Pelicans are exquisite birds, and over the years I have spent a great deal of time watching them as I wait for waves to ride. There are so many things to admire about these creatures, but their most arresting quality as far as I am concerned is their ability to sail along the lip of a wave, perfectly gauging the updraft that comes off the face of the wave. They are in doing this an extraordinary example of grace and efficiency in nature, and there is much to learn from these prehistoric-looking birds about nature and what it means to fit ourselves to the energies of other creatures; much to learn that bespeaks the wisdom of God, even as the death of Pelicans by oil bespeaks the un-wisdom of us. The Spirit of truth of which St. John writes lives in this sea bird and all around us, if we would but heed it. The problem is that we have not heeded this wisdom, and for this, there is a price to pay. Not that God

is punishing us, but rather that we are the victims of our own foolishness and faithlessness.

I began by wondering about an article in *The Lutheran* that seemed to suggest that learning might be a bad thing for faith. It is true enough that learning is a bad thing for any faith that has no wish to understand the world we live in. But it is also true that learning that is without the vision of a discerning faith is as dangerous for our well-being as deep-water oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. What we need is the wisdom that balances faith and learning of all sorts, so that faith is informed and learning is given a vision for the health of the world in which we live and of which we are a part. This coming together of learning and faith is the wisdom of God's Spirit by which the creation has come to be and by which it will be redeemed. Amen.

The Holy Trinity, May 30, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church