**Names for God: Woman Wisdom**

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*Scripture: Proverbs 8:1-9:6, Colossians 1:15-20*

*Hymn: StJ # 36, HWB 77*

Even though we believe God is One, our God goes by many names. The list on the screen is only of the most common and familiar of God’s names found in hymns and in the Bible, names like Shepherd, Spirit, Father, Rock, Love, Mother, Fire. We often read or sing these various names for God without stopping to reflect on them, or on what it means that our God has so many names.

First of all, I think it’s important to understand that God is ultimately a mystery beyond our human understanding. Remember all of those stories in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible about human beings not being able to see God face to face? This is why there’s a burning bush and pillars of cloud and fire, and a special little place in the Temple where only the high priests can go – because God is ultimately beyond our human understanding – a hidden God, as the Bible sometimes says. As theologian Dorothee Soelle says, “language is too small, too narrow, too dusty, too unexpressive, and too misleading to give word to the mystic condition [of God’s presence]. How could God be named?” she asks. “By necessity, are not all names too small?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

But that’s not where God leaves us. No, God makes Godself known to us – also known as revelation – in various ways that we can understand, because God is kind and loving, of course, and wants to be in relationship with us. While a little mystery might be neat in a relationship, you can’t be in any kind of meaningful relationship with someone you don’t know at all. So God makes Godself known in various ways that we mortals can catch onto. So even though God is beyond our comprehension and beyond what our human languages can express, we still have names for God – we can still name God.

Often these names arise from something in our human experiences, something that conveys a characteristic of God’s, but which is actually a metaphor, not something literal. So we can say, as it says in the Psalms, that God is our Rock, but that doesn’t mean our God is a literal rock or that we go around worshipping rocks. But God is strong, and firm, and anchors us as a rock does. So you can see that language about God both is and is not true. Yes, God is our Rock, but no, God is not limited to rockiness. This name, like all names for God, tells us something about who God is, but God is not limited by it or to it in a literal way.

So as we explore various names for God in our worship services in the coming weeks, I invite us to remember this metaphorical nature of all names for God, the way that God by necessity overflows our names for God, and yet all of them tell us something about who God is, why God loves us, and why we love God.

Turning to the name chosen for today, I would like to start by describing a biblical person with whom you may or may not be familiar. I invite you to listen carefully, and to try to figure out who it is.

* This person pre-existed with God before the world was made.
* This person helped God with the creation of the world.
* This person is called God’s first-born child.
* This person preaches in public places, seeking followers.
* This person offers water, life, and a banquet of bread and wine, which this person has prepared.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Who am I describing?

You might be thinking of Sunday school, where the answer is always…Jesus! And you wouldn’t be wrong. All of these characteristics could be describing Jesus, but interestingly, they also all apply to the figure of Woman Wisdom. Now most of us are not very familiar with this biblical person, despite the strong biblical emphasis of our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. I know I was not aware of her until I began my Master’s studies, and when I came across her on the pages of Job and Proverbs, I thought, where has this name for God been all my life?! It’s somewhat startling to find a strong, prophetic, female figure on the pages of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, and a figure who bears so many undeniable similarities to Jesus and his ministry. To our Christian ears, she seems to echo Jesus’ street preaching, his messages of following in the Way of God, his hosting of a banquet of bread and wine, even his relationship to God as one who was with God in the beginning, at play in creation as God’s firstborn child. Except of course that the echo goes in the other direction: Wisdom came first, so Jesus actually echoes her.

We heard a great deal of Wisdom’s story in our Scripture passage for today, taken from Proverbs. I want to outline three sections that we see there:

* **8:1-21 – Wisdom preaching in the streets**: “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? 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: ‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. . . Take my instruction rather than silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. . . By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just.” Here wisdom is calling for people to listen to her and follow her ways. She is both the preacher/prophet, making public proclamations, and the embodiment of the message; she is the preacher of wisdom, and Wisdom herself, in the way that Jesus is both the Messiah and street preacher of the kingdom of God.
* **8:22-31 - Wisdom with God at creation** – Then she takes a step back in time, and tells of how she has been with God from the very beginning: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. … When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above … then 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.” Here Wisdom is declared God’s first creation, and God’s delight; she is intimately connected with God and has been since the beginning of time. It sounds very much like the opening chapter of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1-3a).
* **8:32-9:6 – Wisdom’s house & feast** – Then Wisdom shifts again to inviting people to be her students or followers, this time as she hosts them in the house she herself has built:

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town,
“You that are simple, turn in here!” To those without sense she says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.

This is perhaps the most fascinating portrait of Wisdom, as she is depicted serving a Communion-like meal to people she has invited from the highways and byways to be at her feast. Sound familiar? The New Testament connections are very clear.

 So, let’s pause here to consider a few questions that might be floating around as you hear about Wisdom, perhaps for the first time.

 First of all, **who is she?** Well, there are a few ways to answer this question. Some think she is simply a vivid metaphor for God’s Wisdom, which can be found in many of the books of the Bible, from a poem about searching for Wisdom in the book of Job to the ministry and backstory we’ve read in Proverbs. She also appears as an increasingly divine and exalted figure in several books of the Apocrypha (found in Catholic Bibles), such as the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, and Baruch. Shifting to the New Testament, Wisdom takes on more of a behind-the-scenes role, but for those familiar with her, there are clear echoes of her identity, actions, and words in the life and ministry of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, who mentions Wisdom by name on several occasions.

Taken together, Wisdom’s various biblical appearances take the shape of a narrative of Wisdom. We learn that she is with God at creation as God’s firstborn and worker; that she descends to dwell among the people of Israel as a light and a representative of the law or Torah; that she builds a house and hosts a feast of bread, meat, and wine; that she is a prophet-sage who preaches in the streets, using beatitudes and calling the simple to heed her teaching.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 So **why is Wisdom a woman?** In English translations, it’s not immediately obvious that Wisdom should be female, because grammatically, wisdom is an “it.” But in Hebrew, the word *hokmah* is a “she” (that is, grammatically feminine) so it makes sense to depict wisdom as a woman. In Greek, it’s even more self-evident, as the word for wisdom is *sophia* – a fairly trendy girls’ name at the moment! (That’s where we get the word philosophy or *philosophia*, meaning love of wisdom). But many scholars take issue with reducing Woman Wisdom or Lady Wisdom or Sophia-Wisdom to simply a metaphor or literary device.

Biblical scholar Carol Newsom makes the case that Wisdom is based on a real woman or real women of her context, speaking of “a curious slippage between the literal and the symbolic” in the descriptions of Woman Wisdom. Proverbs, for example, seems to be partly about the wisdom of a young Israelite man marrying a wise woman. So the presumably male students of the sages were to heed their advice and find a capable, wise Israelite woman to marry (represented by Woman Wisdom, especially Proverbs 31).[[4]](#footnote-4) So “the concrete wisdom of women is identical and interchangeable with personified *Hokma*.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In other words, the descriptions of Divine Woman Wisdom in Proverbs are both drawn from the real lives of Israelite women and affirmed as sacred and valuable. So in women’s wisdom, it’s possible to see the face of the Divine.

The later books about Wisdom, especially in the Apocrypha, go on to magnify Wisdom even further, describing her with language that not only hints at closeness to God, but is indisputably divine. This means that Wisdom is also considered a name for God. That’s right – there is actually a significant, sustained female name for God hidden in plain sight in the Bible!

**So, what’s her connection to Jesus?** For Christians, there is the additional, compelling possibility that Wisdom is a name for Jesus Christ, given the similarities between their identities, actions, and words in the Bible.

We see this in the passage from Colossians that echoes many of Wisdom’s words in Proverbs, but about Jesus. I’ve highlighted the parallels here, and you can see there’s a lot highlighted:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn of all creation**; for **inhim all things in heaven and on earth were created**, things visible and invisible, whether **thrones or dominions or rulers or powers**—all things have been created through him and for him. **He himself is before all things**, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; **he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.** For in him **all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell**, and through him **God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Because of this and other parallel passages, many theologians and scholars have concluded that Wisdom is also a name for Jesus Christ in the Bible. Elizabeth Johnson puts it this way: “Since Jesus the Christ is depicted as divine Sophia, then it is not unthinkable – it is not even unbiblical – to confess Jesus the Christ as the incarnation of God imaged in female symbol. Whoever espouses a wisdom Christology is asserting that Jesus is the human being Sophia became; that Sophia in all her fullness was in him.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Just as Jesus is the Word of God, so Jesus is also the Wisdom of God made flesh, as his ministry, words, and relationship to God echo hers.

**Why does she matter for us today?** Now, you might be thinking, why has Susanne led us through this meandering walk through the Bible? Why should we care about this fairly obscure biblical name for God? Well, thanks for bearing with me to this point, and that is an excellent question. I’ll end my sermon by answering it.

Woman Wisdom matters and has become meaningful to me for a few reasons. For one thing, she connects us to the biblical wisdom tradition, which changes how we read the Bible. These biblical books – including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Habakkuk – arose at a time in Israel’s history when pat answers and simplistic explanations of God, faith, justice, and righteousness simply weren’t matching up with their experiences as a people. Big questions like why does a good God allow suffering? what is the purpose of human life? and how do we live as God’s people in exile? were at the forefront of people’s minds as their powerful kingdoms fell apart and their beautiful Temple was destroyed. The world became a messier, more uncertain place. And scholar Peter Enns sees that as changing how we are to read the Bible, and sees that as a good thing. “Wisdom isn’t about flipping to a topical index so we can see what we are to do or think – as if the Bible were a teacher’s edition textbook with the answers supplied in the back. Wisdom is about the lifelong process of being formed into mature disciples, who wander well along the unscripted pilgrimage of faith, in tune to the all-surrounding thick presence of the Spirit of God in us and in the creation around us. Rulebook answers deliver certitude and finality, but wisdom embraces mystery … is learned through experience … asks us to risk letting go of what is familiar for God’s surprises.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Or, in the words of the late Rachel Held Evans, “[Biblical] Wisdom, it seems, is situational. It isn’t just about knowing what to say; it’s about knowing when to say it. And it’s not just about knowing *what* is true; it’s about knowing *when* it’s true.”[[8]](#footnote-8) What a rich tradition to delve into and learn more about, especially in our age of division, arrogance, and disconnection from a groaning creation.

 And then there is of course the fact that Woman Wisdom is a female name for God in – let’s face it – a tradition that has historically neglected to think or speak of God or Jesus Christ in feminine terms. And this insistence on “referring to God through exclusively masculine metaphors” has had some really detrimental effects, not just for women, but for women, men, non-binary/gender-queer folks, and children. All of us lose out when our images of God are too narrow, or when they reinforce hierarchies of domination. So professor Melanie Springer Mock asks us some questions to get us out of our male-centric ruts in how we name God: “What if, when we talked about God, we were able to acknowledge that God is infinitely more than our language can describe? What if we could try on some of the less-used metaphors for God that exist in the Bible, testing how those other metaphors might change the way we know God and also each other? What if we could recognize that the way we talk about God is deeply embedded in our cultures, that it shapes our perceptions of each other, and that it defines who we consider worthy of love and acceptance?”[[9]](#footnote-9)

So as we explore Wisdom and other less familiar names for God, I invite us to think about what it means to encounter God in new names, including female ones. If you’re a woman, does it bring God closer to your experience, which might be both intimidating and encouraging? If you’re a man, what does it mean for you to think of Jesus as a different gender than you? Does it broaden and deepen God’s mystery? Does it help remind you that women around you are also in God’s image and also disciples? I hope this worship series will lead us further along these kinds of questions and wonderings, not in order to do away with the old names, but in order to broaden and deepen our sense that within the mystery of God, there is unity and diversity. Though our God is One, God has many names – and there is wisdom in acknowledging that all of them are sacred. Amen.

1. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Fortress, 2001), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Using the apocryphal stories of Wisdom, one could also talk about how she makes her tent among the people of Israel, but is rejected, and so returns to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Susanne Guenther Loewen, “Jesus Christ as Woman Wisdom: Feminist Wisdom Christology, Mystery, and Christ’s Body” (MTS thesis, Conrad Grebel University College/University of Waterloo, 2010), 9-11. See <https://www.academia.edu/12821763/Jesus_Christ_as_Woman_Wisdom_Feminist_Wisdom_Christology_Mystery_and_Christs_Body?email_work_card=title> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carol A. Newsom, “Wisdom and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. A. Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda Maloney and William McDonough(Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2000), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Peter Enns, *How the Bible* Actually *Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads us to Wisdom Rather than Answers – and Why That’s Great News* (New York: Harper One, 2019), 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Melanie Springer Mock, *Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2018), 98, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)