

The Sunday Missive – January 8, 2023

The First Sunday after the Epiphany

Hymn 117 Brightest and best of the stars of the morning

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Shall we then yield him, in costly devotion,
Odors of Edom, and offerings divine,
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
Vainly with gifts would his favor secure,
Richer by far is the heart's adoration,
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLwAcjuHZ_w

The Collect of the Day

Gracious Creator, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved child and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. **Amen**

Sirach 24:1-12

Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: 'I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway. Among all these I sought a resting-place; in whose territory should I abide?

'Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance." Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting-place, and in Jerusalem was my domain. I took root in an honoured people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, you gods* ***Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.***

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name* ***Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.***

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders* ***The Lord is upon the mighty waters.***

The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice* ***The voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.***

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees* ***The Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;***

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf* ***And Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.***

The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire; the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness* ***The Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.***

The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe* ***And strips the forests bare.***

And in the temple of the Lord* ***All are crying, "Glory!"***

Acts 10:34-43

Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Hymn 104 A Stable Lamp is Lighted

A stable lamp is lighted whose glow shall wake the sky;
The stars shall bend their voices, and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry, and straw like gold shall shine;
A barn shall harbour heaven, a stall become a shrine.

This child through David's city shall ride in triumph by;
The palm shall strew its branches, and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry, though heavy, dull and dumb,
And lie within the roadway to pave his kingdom come.

Yet he shall be forsaken, and yielded up to die;
The sky shall groan and darken, and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry for gifts of love abused;
God's blood upon the spearhead, God's blood again refused.

But now, as at the ending, the low is lifted high;
The stars shall bend their voices, and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry in praises of the child
By whose descent among us the worlds are reconciled.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxJ02P9SPmE>

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Wisdom to Know the Difference -- Epiphany 1A

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This simple prayer, attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and popularized by its continued use in twelve-step recovery programs, stands among the most powerful and provocative petitions ever uttered by humankind.

Like the Ten Commandments, attributed to God via Moses and which are thought to contain everything necessary for a righteous life; like Jesus’ Love Commandment, upon which likewise are said to hang all natural law and prophecy, the Serenity Prayer rises up as an invitation to ourselves whenever we speak or think it. The universe is inviting us to full participation in its reality and we are exhorting ourselves to shed our vanities and fully perceive our place and purpose in the order of things. The means of our fulfillment are the spiritual gift of discernment: wisdom, attained only through the serene contemplation of Creation: things, enabling us to act righteously: the courage to change.

The cultural roots of Niebuhr’s prayer are many. The first-century Stoic philosopher Epictetus advised

"Make the best use of what is in your power, and take the rest as it happens."

In the 8th century, we find this from Buddhist scholar Shantideva in India:

“If there's a remedy when trouble strikes, what reason is there for dejection? And if there is no help for it, what use is there in being glum?”

A few hundred years later, Jewish philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol reminded,

“At the head of all understanding, is realizing what is and what cannot be, and the consoling of what is not in our power to change.”

Perhaps Niebuhr, as a child in Wright City, Missouri, was entertained by a translation of Charles Perrault’s 1695 collection, *Histoire ou contes du temps passés, avec des moralités*, which is to say, (‘Tales of the past with morals’) better-known as *Les Contes de ma mère l’Oye* or *Tales of Mother Goose*, which contains the following:

For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy, or there is none;
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it.

Each of these snippets expresses the thrust of Niebuhr’s prayer. And like all matters of the mind and heart, they require ongoing attention and reflection to be of value. Because we have the blessing and curse of reason, life demands – God demands – that we use it. She wants us to think before acting, about all the information that comes our way, especially Holy Scripture, and as Winnie the Pooh would say ‘most speshly’ anything that purports to contain wisdom, such as commandments and laws. To take no action without considering how that action navigates between the markers of Wisdom and Love as we return home: Sophia the Red buoy of Wisdom on our right and Jesus, the green one of Love, ringing on our left. If we keep these two in view, we are sure to make the harbour God has prepared for us.

It is said that God has a sense of humor: “Man proposes, God disposes.” So even the greatest of revelations is inherently ironic. What does it mean to say “Thou wilt have no other gods before me,” when the One saying it is invisible, inaudible and ineffable? What does it mean to say, “Love thine enemy?” What does it mean that the wisest thing one can do is to pray for the wisdom one lacks? Every prayer, indeed, every life well-lived, consists of an

ongoing attempt to align ourselves with what is real and good and just out of reach; to live into the ironies that continually characterize our existence. In this sense, the only real effort we can make to acquire wisdom is to desire it.

Our first reading today, and the psalm we sang together come from a body of recorded known as Wisdom Literature. It is safe to say that The Serenity Prayer resides in the canon of modern-day wisdom, as do indeed the related passages just mentioned, including Mother Goose. This is not an academic classification, but rather an attempt to do what God has surely intended, and that is to think on these things; to ponder them in our hearts; to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest what is received, so that our resulting activity furthers Creation instead of undermining it.

The Book of Wisdom was written down around the end of the first century BCE and the beginning of the first century CE.” From the Christian perspective, that means around the year Zero. This time of the rolling year, when we symbolically reset lots of elements of our lives, that date can provide a poetic benchmark. The text seems to have been composed in Egypt; probably Alexandria. It was intended to encourage the Jews to remain confident of God’s presence, even in a foreign and hostile environment. Today, surrounded as we are by a culture that gives little or no support to inward reflection, and that often (and dismayingly) equates religious faith with jingoistic nationalism, we can use the same kind of reassurance.

In thinking about these texts, it is important for us to see that Wisdom is being identified with God. In Sirach, Wisdom is the power of God that becomes apparent in the tangible world. If it is true, as many point out, that the first incarnation of God in the world is the physical world itself, indeed, the Universe itself, Wisdom can be thought of as God’s first incarnation as humanity. Whenever someone has spoken godly truth, God is present, just as when two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name. As does Christ, Wisdom exists to prove that God exists amongst humanity. When

we pray for the wisdom to know the difference between what we must accept and what we must strive to change, we become part of that proof ourselves; we are working God's program.

In this literary and spiritual tradition, the female aspect of God that is Wisdom has always existed and has been imparted to Israel – not alone, but most 'specially. We are not saved from slavery to Egypt – or to sin – just so we can go play golf. We have been called to prayer and the loving nurture of the rest of Creation. It is Wisdom who will empower us to do so. Likewise when we read the Holy Gospel, we encounter The Word, present at Creation and with us now as the means of our salvation. When we perceive and join the universal Christ, we become capable of recognizing and fulfilling our vocation in the world.

But we do not create that gift, any more than we create the cosmos. We receive The Word if we will, the essence of which is a desire to promote peace and care for the poor. Sure, the promised by-product is eternal life. But not too many of us are in a hurry to get there. Meanwhile, as Sam Cooke said, we got to work right here. And as Jesus clarifies for us, "Unto whomsoever much is given, of that one shall be much required: and the one to whom others have entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more."

In its longer form, Reinhold Niebuhr's wisdom prayer goes on to spell out the particulars of such a life: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference, living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace, taking this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will, that I may be reasonably happy in this world, and supremely happy with you, forever in the next.

The great conundrum lies in that word surrender. We surrender, not by sitting down in a puddle and pouting, but by taking action. We surrender by attacking our vanity, our self-

involvement, our ignorance, our denial; our faithlessness. We surrender by addressing what God would have us address. We surrender by seeking Wisdom and by reminding ourselves we will never fully possess her, any more than we will ever possess God. That is the great irony and the great vocation of life: praying to be what we can never fully be; working to complete work that will never be done; more fully loving that which Christ alone can ever fully love.

Hymn 573 Father eternal, Ruler of creation

Father eternal, Ruler of creation,
Spirit of life, which moved ere form was made;
Through the thick darkness covering every nation,
Light to man's blindness, O be Thou our aid:
Thy Kingdom come, O Lord, Thy will be done.

Races and peoples, lo! we stand divided,
And sharing not our griefs, no joy can share;
By wars and tumults Love is mocked, derided,
His conquering cross no kingdom wills to bear:
Thy Kingdom come, O Lord, Thy will be done.

Envious of heart, blind-eyed, with tongues confounded,
Nation by nation still goes unforgiven;
In wrath and fear, by jealousies surrounded,
Building proud towers which shall not reach to heaven:
Thy Kingdom come, O Lord, Thy will be done.

How shall we love Thee, holy, hidden Being,
If we love not the world which Thou hast made?
O give us brother love for better seeing
Thy Word made flesh, and in a manger laid:
Thy Kingdom come, O Lord, Thy will be done.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIHDdagn7tk>

To a Wreath of Snow

O transient voyager of heaven!
O silent sign of winter skies!
What adverse wind thy sail has driven
To dungeons where a prisoner lies?
Methinks the hands that shut the sun
So sternly from this morning's brow
Might still their rebel task have done
And checked a thing so frail as thou.
They would have done it had they known
The talisman that dwelt in thee,
For all the suns that ever shone
Have never been so kind to me!
For many a week, and many a day
My heart was weighed with sinking gloom
When morning rose in mourning grey
And faintly lit my prison room
But angel like, when I awoke,
Thy silvery form so soft and fair
Shining through darkness, sweetly spoke
Of cloudy skies and mountains bare;
The dearest to a mountaineer
Who, all life long has loved the snow
That crowned her native summits drear,
Better, than greenest plains below.
And voiceless, soulless, messenger
Thy presence waked a thrilling tone
That comforts me while thou art here
And will sustain when thou art gone

Emily Brontë