



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

Vol. 19, No. 3 • Fall 2008

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 instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare
with her.'

Proverbs 8: 1-11 NRS

Have you heard her voice? She calls from the court house steps. She shouts in the market place. She stands at the cross roads of commerce on the information highway. She lifts her voice above the pundits, pollsters, politicians, scam artists, and spin masters. She exclaims, "You! Yes, you, you idiots, I am talking to you. I will be blunt. Wise up, you blockheads!"

Wisdom calls. She stations herself in the open, in the midst of commerce and activity. She raises a racket. Why don't we hear her?

Wisdom has been calling me for days. She follows me about, nudges my shoulder, wakes me up at night, and haunts my dreams. I

imagine her pacing under the moon with her hands on her hips, preaching to the zinnias and the crickets, "Well the chickens have come home to roost. Yes indeedly. Home to roost. I tried to warn them, but they wouldn't listen. Here chick, chick, chick."

I have been hearing Wisdom call. But I have been actually listening to the news more. I take in morning news radio with my breakfast, read the newspaper over lunch, catch up with afternoon radio, then put my feet up with evening television news programs. My world has become a twenty four hour reality show. I am a nonstop spectator, feeling alternately outraged, victimized, and heartened by the flitting shadows on my TV and computer screens.

In a time of national crisis, the prophet Isaiah spoke to Israel, "You may listen and listen, but you will not understand. You may look and look again, but you will never know. This people's wits are dulled, their ears are deafened and their eyes are blinded." Isaiah 6: 9-10 Like those Isaiah addressed, my wits are dulled with a gluttonous consumption of the ideas, opinions, commentary, and agendas of other people. No wonder Lady Wisdom has taken to talking to the flowers.

When the chickens come home, the gig is up, the charade is exposed. The consequences of poor choices and bad actions come back to sit in our lives, laying their endless eggs, and

rearing their cackling progeny. We find feathers littering the living room and chicken manure smeared on our ceramic tile floors. We are left holding a thing in our hands which is a sham.

A Sham

A man plants a cedar and the rain makes it grow, so that later on he will have cedars to cut down; or he chooses an ilex or an oak to raise a stout tree for himself in the forest. It becomes fuel for his fire: some of it he takes and warms himself, some he kindles and bakes bread on it, and some he makes into a god, shaping it into shape; he bows down to it and prostrates himself and prays to it, saying, 'Save me; for thou are my god.'

Such people neither know nor understand, their eyes made too blind to see, their minds too narrow to discern. Such will not use their reason, they have neither the wit nor the sense to say, 'Half of it I have burnt, yes, and used its embers to bake bread; I have roasted meat and so I am worshipping a log of wood.' These feed on ashes indeed! Their own deluded minds have misled them, they cannot recollect themselves so far as to say, 'Why! This thing in my hand is a sham.'

Isaiah 44: 12-20 NEB, paraphrased

When the chickens come home to roost they bring both danger and opportunity. As the glare of truth exposes our misconceptions, illusions, and self deceit, our naïve innocence may give way to bitter disappointment, blame or resentment. We lash out in anger and retaliation, or fall into the pit of self denigration, anxiety and shame.

Constance Fitzgerald writes that “Sophia (the wisdom of God) turns life upside down, challenges my most deeply held beliefs and values, undermines what I have learned, claims whom and what I possess, and

highlights the limitations and oppressive character of what I depend on most for satisfaction and assurance.”

The return of the chickens is an opportunity, because they are angels in disguise heralding the good news of the beginning of wisdom and the education of our soul’s desire. The chickens, consequences of our behavior and choices, are Wisdom’s own brood, which she gathers under her wings and begins to teach.

When Diana, my daughter went to kindergarten for her first day of school, I watched her walk into the building in her pink corduroy jumper, pink knee socks and pig tails. Clutching her backpack, stuffed with school supplies, radiant with hope and excitement, she skipped away from me without looking back. I wept all the way home. When I picked her up after school, I asked, “How was it?”



She was quiet for a moment, then said, solemnly, “Well, it was not like in my dreams.” Oh dear. Already she had begun her journey toward wisdom, a sadder, but wiser girl.

How are we to hear Wisdom’s call in the cacophony of posers, deceit, and confusion? How does Wisdom get a word in in our brawling public discourse? What is fake? What is real? We have grown skeptical, cynical, distrusting of leaders, products, and institutions. Is nothing like our dreams? Many walk in a barren wasteland of betrayals and losses, where extreme self confidence, addiction, sarcasm or god-is-

dead nihilism are the only ways persons can retain a bit of self respect and bitter hope.

Wisdom has a hard sell. Who wants to accept instruction, when we can get silver and gold, coral and jewels? It is not that we do not want to be wise. We have wanted that from the beginning. And our desire for wisdom got us into a lot of trouble. We already had wisdom. We had all that we needed.

However, when a voice insinuated doubt, the possibility of more than paradise - that down the road a bit, over that next hill there was a better house or car or college or lover or recipe for perfection, we chomped down on that lie and swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Perfection was not simply living in the presence of bounty in the garden of love, we could actually be like God, the one who had made us and put us here! We could escape the misery and anxiety of being vulnerable creatures dependent on our creator and each other. Instead we could know everything. We could be gods ourselves!

You know the story:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree

was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Genesis 3: 1-6 NRS

When we use the gifts of creation for our own ends, we reduce creation to a thing. We misappropriate wisdom for our purposes. We refuse to be teachable. When unharnessed desire calcifies into the stranglehold of selfish ambition, we have lost sight of our purpose and the source that animates, shapes and brings to fruition God's dream for us.

Two Kinds of Wisdom

James distinguished for the early church the difference between the wisdom from our culture and the wisdom from above. Earthly or conventional wisdom is rooted in selfish ambition, coveting, and desire which defies the boundaries set by God.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

James 3: 13-17 NRSV

So where do we find this wisdom from on high? We are all too familiar with the earthly variety. Poor miserable Job lies on his dung heap, scratching his sores with a pot shard. A crowd of bloggers, opinion pollsters, and commentators have descended

upon him like flies. Job confronts the conventional wisdom of his age as he struggles to make sense out of his circumstances and the mystery of his own suffering. He distinguishes between his own innocent suffering and the sort we bring on ourselves. Yet neither he nor his friends can make sense of it all.

Up against a wall, facing into an abyss of meaningless, Job lifts his voice:
Where can wisdom be found? Where is the source of understanding? No person knows the way to it; it is not found in the land of living persons. The depths of the ocean say, 'It is not in us', and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' Red gold cannot buy it, nor can its price be weighed out in silver. ... Where then can wisdom be found, and where is the source for understanding? ... God knows the way to it, he alone knows its source...And God said to humankind: The fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to turn from evil is understanding."

Job 28: 12-28 selected verses NEB

Wisdom is intimately tied to a particular relationship and response to God. Biblically that relationship is defined as "fear." The notion that the fear of the Lord is related to wisdom runs through scripture like a golden thread.

Because we do not fear the Lord, we fear one another. We fear war, disasters, economic loss and crisis, illness, and injury. We fear global warming, terrorists, scam artists, and nuclear attack. We fear those who are different from us - people of other races, religions, nationalities, and beliefs. The reality of our generalized fear and anxiety is a fundamental principle of marketing and persuasion. The skillful use of fear builds dynasties, maintains empires, and determines public policy.

We fear just about everything, but God. I remember as a child hearing grownups say of someone who was behaving carelessly or foolishly, "They need a good dose of the fear of the Lord." Nobody told me what fear of the Lord meant. But I had no trouble understanding that it meant paying attention to and respecting the ways of God.

Our language no longer holds the nuanced meaning of fear as it relates to divinity. The word is problematic for some who have heard hellfire and brimstone sermons by pastors preaching an angry vengeful God. If you have grown up terrified and controlled by such a misunderstanding of God, fear of the Lord holds no wisdom, only revulsion, condemnation, and guilt.

A Thing of Wood

The first time I encountered fear of God was over thirty years ago. After a long period of searching, I believed I was called to be a minister and was preparing to go to seminary. One spring night in Kalamazoo, Michigan I woke suddenly from a frightening dream. In the dream I saw strange writing forming in the heavens. The words were in a language I did not understand. I sat bolt upright, terrified in the presence of something, someone, wholly other, foreign.

My eyes fell upon a small walnut cross hanging on the wall. Illuminated by the dim light of the street lamp outside my window, the cross, fashioned by my father, made its silent appeal and offered a mysterious comfort. I had not given the cross much thought, but now in my terror I got in a visceral way, the connection between the unfathomable, immortal, invisible God of the universe and this Jesus. I understood Jesus, both as God with us on our terms, and as the bridge which spans the chasm

between the creation and its creator. The cross connects me safely to what is intolerably awesome and beyond me. Jesus was God teaching, dying, and leaving behind an empty cross like a cast off locust husk, as he shed mortality for eternal life.

I grasped that walnut cross and held it to my heart, hanging on for dear life. I knew this thing in my hand was not a sham, but held a living truth, as it pointed to both a mystery and the means to being in relationship with that mystery. Rather than cowering in terror before a power utterly beyond me, the cross offered a channel through which I could understand the language and communicate with that awesomeness. Jesus invited me to crawl into that empty husk he left behind and be conformed to his life of sacrificial love and service. "Here," he said, "little one, follow me. I will show you the way."


The fear of God was the beginning of my wisdom, and my deeper introduction to Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God. Jesus was the one of whom the prophet Isaiah foretold:

The spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

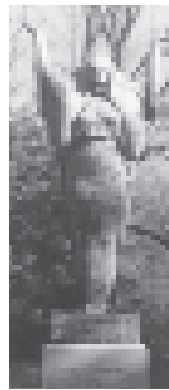
Isaiah 11: 1-3 NIV

In the dead of night in Kalamazoo I met the fear of God, sometimes called the *mysterium tremendum*- the holy terror that penetrates our defenses and arouses humility, awe, and the need for salvation. Some of my notions of ministry as a "good vocational choice," a place to make a name for myself, and other illusions and selfish ambitions, were swept away. Some, I confess, still persist and the chickens show up from time to time, as Wisdom sets about to reconcile my dreams with God's dreams.

Let There Be Light

A few years after that night time visitation, I was walking my dogs in Bernheim Forest, an arboretum near Bardstown, Kentucky. I came upon a large statue of a woman. She stood on a pedestal above the words: Let there be light. Beneath were the letters: . Hebrew. A language I was then able to read.

I stopped transfixed before the statue. The hair stood up on my arms. I watched the fur on the dogs' necks stand up; and these creatures who had been calmly enjoying the walk began barking wildly at this piece of stone.



For my part I was both attracted and fearful. The evening before I spontaneously had drawn a figure in my journal nearly identical to this statue. A sense of great strength, peace, and joy surrounded me.

I have never had a vision or much mystical or paranormal stuff. I am suspicious of that and side with St. John of the Cross in not putting much stock in any of it. My life runs a fairly mundane course, firmly planted in what I can see and touch and taste.

I can't explain what happened, but I will make a stab at what I learned from it.

First, what we do not see in our desire to be like God, is that we already are like God. We are made in God's image. Further God has chosen to glorify divinity and the creation by burying Holiness itself in the heart of our infirmity.

Meister Eckhart put it like this, “The same eye with which we see God is the eye which God sees us. ... The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God as if he were standing yonder and they here, but it is not to be so God and I, we are one. By knowing God I take him into myself.”

Second, we project outward on people, groups, pieces of wood, statues, and nature realities within ourselves which are not conscious to us. These may be positive or negative aspects of ourselves. These are parts of ourselves, which for various reasons we have not owned or integrated into our sense of who we are.

The serpent’s seduction is the lie, the attack on Truth, that we are not already like God. We believe that we can find what we feel is missing in us out there. The darkness of fear and sin obscure the light that the wholeness is here, now, always. Sin feeds on the lie of ever escalating incompleteness and perpetual need.

As we withdraw our projections we suffer the truth that things have not been as we dreamed. We also are able to claim for ourselves the very things we had projected outward. We discover that God’s dream for us, in us, is better than anything we had imagined.

Fred Craddock wrote that “people live in images rather than ideas and [that] human transformation occurs when images carrying deep symbolic force are modified or replaced by others.” Part of the formation of faith involves ongoing withdrawal and integration of projections. We come to terms with the truth that the evil I see in others is also in me, and the satisfaction I long for in something external to me is

already within me. In this process we discover for ourselves that the kingdom of God is indeed within us. There is a gradual shift in my image from a God out there or up there to an awareness of the living reality of Christ dwelling within me with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

You will know wisdom has come, when you stop looking for her. You will know God is living within you when you stop seeking peace and enjoy the peace that dwells within you. There was nothing particularly numinous or holy about that statue, a thing of stone. There was something numinous in me. Something I had not recognized or owned in myself. Something I have been achingly seeking and pining after all my life. Now, at last, along with the chickens (my life choices and consequences, good and bad) Wisdom has come home to gather them under her wings and roost next to my heart.

Listen up! Wisdom speaks. God is within you, the Lord God Almighty, creator of the universe. All you seek, yearn for, and desire is there within you. Right now. Give up the lie of your estrangement. You and the Holy Trinity are lovingly gazing upon each other with your shared eye.

Now tell me this, if Christ, the Wisdom of God, is within you, what do you possibly have to worry about?

Loretta F. Ross

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Matthew 23:37

Works cited:

Constance Fitzgerald, "Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation" in **Carmel and Contemplation, Transforming Human Consciousness**, Ed Kevin Culligan, OCD, Regis Jordan, OCD. ICS Publications, Washington DC, 2000, p 309.

Raymond B. Blakely, **Meister Eckhart, A Modern Translation**, pp. 206, 182

Fred B. Craddock, **Overhearing the Gospel**, p 97



Midday Prayer at The Sanctuary

a word of scripture

a bit of community

mostly silence

Most Fridays 12:45-1:00 pm

Stop by, if you are in the neighborhood.

1600 SW Campbell, Topeka , Kansas



Copies of Holy Ground are available for a small cost. \$2.00 each, 10 copies for \$15.00, 20 copies for \$30.00. Shipping included.

Prayer ~ Reflection ~ Action

1. Connect with the God:

What images "out there" hold for you the numinous presence of God? Where in your life do you sense God's love and presence? Place yourself physically or imaginatively in one of these places for ten or twenty minutes.

2. Connect with Yourself:

What prevents you from hearing Wisdom's call? What pulls you out of union with the Wisdom of God? What in yourself, might you be projecting outward on someone instead of owning it within yourself?

3. Connect with Another:

Share a time when you had a good dose of the fear of the Lord? What happened? How did respond? As you reflect on that time, what speaks to you now in your current situation?

The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22: 2-3

*One space spreads through
all creatures equally –
inner-world-space.*

*Birds quietly come and go
flying through us.*

*Oh, I that want to grow,
the tree I look outside at
grows in me!*

Rainer Maria Rilke



**Holy Ground, formerly titled *making Haqqodesh*, is published by The Sanctuary Foundation for Prayer,
a not for profit charitable organization.**

**1600 SW Campbell Ave., Topeka, Kansas 66604 785-354-7122
www.fromholyground.org info@fromholyground.org**

Copyright © 2006, 2007 Loretta F. Ross. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior permission of the publisher.



**1600 SW Campbell St.
Topeka, KS 66604**

Return service requested

**PRSR STD
US Postage
PAID
HOLTON, KANSAS
Permit No. 70**