

Worldly Wisdom
First Sunday after Pentecost
June 12, 2022,
The Rev. Katherine M. Bush

Several years ago, our extended family took a trip to Yellowstone National Park. We saw all the things: Old Faithful and Grand Prismatic Springs; we went white water rafting; we hiked; a guide took us out to see buffalo and wolves and bears. When we were out with him scouting these beasts, he told us that while he loved and respected all these animals, he was really enamored with crows. Crows, he told us, are exceedingly smart - working puzzles at the same level as six and seven-year-old children. And crows not only have powerful memories, but they also seem to be able to pass down their learned lessons. As an experiment, crows, it seems, were either tormented or treated neutrally by people wearing different masks, and not only did the crows involved remember, but years later their offspring and other crows in their shared social circles would react negatively to the same tormentor masks.

In Finding the Mother-tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest, Suzanne Simard teaches her readers that trees learn and have memories too. Forests, she says, are not places with lots of individual trees, but communities sharing resources and sending messages to each other through a network of roots and fungus. Trees communicate warnings and share nutrients with young saplings and ailing trees; they are in relationship with each other - cooperating, not competing.

Elephants cooperate with each other too, and they grieve. Elephants are recorded tending to their dead and gathering around a deceased member to trumpet together. Sandhill cranes mate monogamously for life. From dancing at courtship to co-parenting, they stick together for their relatively long twenty-year lifespans. An octopus might be one of the most mischievous and curious creatures we've met; some say they have a consciousness. Dolphins have individual names that they call each other. Whales play and perhaps sometimes breach - leaping from the surface and crashing back down - just because they can, and wouldn't you?

You probably didn't come to church today for a nature documentary, yet here's the thing. All of these recent discoveries about the inner lives of animals and even plants only hint at what we were told almost three thousand years ago. These new scientific discoveries courtesy of underwater cameras and fine-tuned microscopes and patient field experiments are simply confirmation of a much older understanding of the wisdom of the world.

"The Lord created me - wisdom - at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." Before the depths of the sea, before the heights of the mountains, before the fields and skies and waters, "I was there... I was beside him, like a master worker." Wisdom, the poem suggests, was woven into the creation, and wisdom was the weaver. Wisdom and understanding are intertwined with the ways of the world. So perhaps then, at least one of our faithful tasks might be to look for the tell-tale mark of that master worker, the way you recognize the style of an architect or of a designer. One of our tasks is to listen to the world, the way we listen for the familiar riff of a musician or the pattern and voice of a poet.

When we seek, we will find this signature wisdom by paying attention to the world around us. As poet Mary Oliver tells us our “instructions for living a life” are to “pay attention / be astonished / tell about it.” This looking and listening might mean learning more about the egg-laying patterns of sea turtles and how their hatchlings come out and immediately scramble from the sand to the sea. But it seems also to send us out to stand at the crossroads of the city and listen to the hustle and bustle of the human world. Wisdom is crying out from the corner of Second and Adams where we can hear both the voice of the river and the voices of the people streaming in and out from 201 Poplar.

Believing that wisdom is intrinsic, that it has always been and will always be, that it is present in everything and every place, means that we can be “guided into all truth” by all that we encounter - from the simple meal of bread and wine here at this table to the banquet of experiences every day of our lives.

And we need not think that this learning of wisdom will be a staid and serious experience. “I was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” Taking in the world’s wisdom means absorbing its delight, its delightfulness. Another poet, Ross Gay, reminds us in his collection of a year’s worth of noticed delights that, “It didn’t take me long to learn that the discipline or practice of [noticing and recording delight] occasioned a kind of delight radar. Or maybe it was more like the development of a delight muscle. Something that implies that the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study... I felt my life to be more full of delight. Not without sorrow or fear or pain or loss. But more full of delight. I also learned this year that my delight grows — much like love and joy — when I share it.”

God’s wisdom is foundational to the world we live in, the world God made is full of delight. It is a profound delight and joy when we study it, and it grows when we share it, passing it along in our social circles and to our children like the crow. Leaping from our gravity-bound world like a humpback whale, just because we can. God’s wisdom cries out from everywhere: from busy intersections, from the heights and depths of the world, and even from our own bodies. There is wisdom in a child’s growing body learning to balance on a bicycle, and in the hard won wisdom of our aging bodies known to predict rain-storms even in their aching. There is insight and understanding that comes from the neural networks and their diversity and even more in the heart that has been broken and healed. Rejoicing in the inhabited world - in the worlds we inhabit, our kitchens, our parklands, our bodies, this too is a faithful task and a discipline we can take on with joy.

Who knows where you will hear the spirit calling to you: a roadside gas station, your dining room table, the voice of intuition in your mind. Who knows what will reveal its mysterious nature to you: showing off the handiwork of the master craftsman. Who knows how you will become wise to the world and how you will share that knowledge with those around you.

One more poet, Jack Gilbert, cajoles us, “We must risk delight ... we must have / the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless / furnace of this world. To make injustice the only / measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.” As the modern and ancient poets note, wisdom does not negate the presence of sorrow or fear, yet delightful wisdom calls to us too. God’s wisdom is embedded deep in all of creation. And that insight and wonder is cause for God’s joy and delight; may God’s wisdom be our cause for joy and delight as well.