

Trinity Sunday: Proverbs 8.1-4, 22-31

June 16, 2019

The Rev. Scott Walters

Wallace Stevens once wrote, "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding,/ But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud."

If you think I opened this Trinity Sunday sermon with that quote because I returned last week with 35 other Calvary folk from a pilgrimage walk on the Way of St. James in Spain, you'd be right. If you don't think it helps explain the mystery of the Trinity, you'd be right again. But I've decided not to explain God to you today.

Sorry. If you came for an explanation of God, you've not only come on the wrong Sunday, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong church. But the good news is that the lectionary provides us with a reading from the eighth chapter of Proverbs. A chapter that serves as a pretty helpful corrective to what we may think the purpose of a Sunday dedicated to a doctrine is. A helpful corrective to our overactive impulse to explain, and a curious insistence that wisdom is not something found by myself and within myself in my very own room, but out in the world around me.

"In my room, the world is beyond my understanding,/ But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud."

Do you know how it is that in your room, or in your office, or way up there inside your own head (which is really what Stevens means, I think), sometimes the world gets more and more confusing, the harder we try to make sense of it? Or, how sometimes, when left to my own thoughts, the world gets simpler. But it gets simpler in ways that are untrue. Maybe because in my mind it's less complicated by the likes of you.

But when I get up from my chair and out of my head and go take a walk, the world becomes the world again. It's no longer a concept. It consists first of these three or four hills and a cloud. Hills and clouds that may be lovely or may be ominous, but they are material things that exist outside my head. Things I can't quite imagine away.

Three or four hills and a cloud can be plenty to contend with in a day. Especially when the hills are quite a bit longer and steeper than you recalled from the last time you walked the Camino. Sorry about that, fellow pilgrims. I really did forget how long the climb out of Portomarín was, and the little upticks in the elevation graph on my phone looked nothing like the vertical sections of road on day 3.

And when those billowy clouds went dark and emptied themselves on us Thursday afternoon, our consolation was not that we could imagine the rain away or forget that we were soaked to the bone. It was that once you're thoroughly wet at least you can't get any wetter.

But even on a rainy Thursday in Spain, whatever work the Camino de Santiago de Compostela does on one's soul, whatever wisdom it has to impart happens one step at a time. It comes in through each encounter of the bottom of one's boot with the earth, and through encounters with other walkers along the Way.

Do you think of wisdom, not as a virtue an individual possesses within herself, not something that exists mostly in the mind, but something or even Someone we encounter and are told to pay attention to out in the world around us? Proverbs does.

"On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads [Wisdom] 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."

In Proverbs, Wisdom is not a still small voice in your heart. Wisdom is a woman calling out to us from gates and crossroads and portals. She calls to us from all kinds of human encounters and exchanges and interactions. Presumably from the conflicts and struggles we find ourselves in as well. She has to raise her voice, we're told, because we just don't pay her much attention.

But what's striking about this Wisdom is that all of these human activities are placed within the broader life of creation. Wisdom isn't about having a more rational mind or a better functioning brain. Wisdom was present long before language or human consciousness came to be:

"Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth," our reading says. "Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil."

The images of Proverbs 8 rival the final chapters of Job in the beautiful way that they place human life within the rest of the life of the universe, and then tell us clearly that this story is not all about us. Wisdom was around long before we came onto the scene. So, whatever wisdom we human beings manage to acquire, only happens in truthful contact with the the much larger and much older world outside our heads.

When we returned from the Camino last week, as you know, the news back home had not all been good. It never is. But images of hurled bricks and billowing tear gas are not business as usual, even in a city like ours that suffers from too much violence already. Tensions present every day in some of our communities erupted after a young man being served an arrest warrant ended up being shot by U.S. Marshals.

When something like the events in Frayser happens, I really want wisdom to be all about slipping back into the safety of my own room and thinking things out by myself. Inconveniently, this week I had Proverbs 8 to struggle with. Inconveniently, God seemed to be telling me not to look for wisdom in the quiet of my own heart, but in the streets. On the heights. Beside the way. Maybe even amid the tear gas and the stones.

But what in the world could Wisdom be yelling to us from the midst of this chaos and pain?

There is an old Eskimo custom in which an angry person walks the emotion out of his or her system in a straight line across the landscape. The point at which the anger finally leaves the body is marked with a stick. And the stick bears witness to the depth of the rage in a way that the whole community can see.

What interests me about this custom is not the notion that any anger can be "walked off" if one just walks far enough. What interests me is the stick. You see, as far as I can tell, the custom makes no distinction as to whether or how much of the anger was justified or not. It only makes visible that this anger was indeed alive within the community, whether it was a hundred yards or a dozen miles of rage. Even once the particular expression of anger was over, it was remembered.

Friends, I'm no Solomon. But I do think Wisdom still calls to us from the streets. She still calls us to listen to the fear and the rage in our world and ask deeper questions about their sources. Race and poverty and desperation and fear all contributed to the horror of what erupted in Frayser this week. Can we not mark moments like this one moment with a stick, remember them honestly, and commit ourselves again to attend to the sources of the damage and the violence we do to one other in this world?

The good news, even in a bad news week, is that Wisdom is still alive. She lives deep in the true nature of things as she has from long before human communities came to be. She is alive in the flowers that reach toward the sun to bloom and the river that makes its way patiently to the sea. And she is alive and calling to us in school cafeterias and hospital rooms and ancient pilgrim routes and courts of law and even churches from time to time, I'd like to think. But she is also present in the hurting and hopeless places of our world. Because her cry is to all that live. Not just to some of us, but to all of us.

Perhaps, then, her first question to each of us today is, "Will you listen for me in the places beyond the walls of your particular room?"