

Sermon: September 13, 2015 Proverbs 1: 20-33
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

How many of you have read THE SHACK?

Back in 2007, this book, written by Alberta-born William Paul Young, was at the top of the bestseller list. A Christian book reviewer named Tim Challies, who didn't like the book all that much but knows it well, describes it like so:

The Shack revolves around a man named Mack Philips. Four years before this story begins, Mack's young daughter, Missy, was abducted and brutally murdered. As the story begins, Mack, who has been living in the shadow of his *Great Sadness*, receives a strange note in which God invites him to return to the shack where the crime occurred, for a get together. Though uncertain, Mack visits the scene of the crime and there has a weekend-long encounter with God, or, more properly, with the godhead.

In this encounter, God is portrayed in three persons: a large beaming African-American woman known as Papa, who later on turns into a pony-tailed, grey-haired man; Jesus, a young to middle-aged man of Middle-Eastern (i.e. Jewish) descent; and Holy Spirit, portrayed by Sarayu, a small, delicate and eclectic woman of Asian descent. The banter between the members of the Trinity is nearly constant, and is geared towards helping us understand the love that exists between them.

Through this loving, lively interaction of the Trinity, Mack gradually comes to resolve his Great Sadness. Along the way, the author challenges the reader to understand that God is inherently good and that we can only truly trust God if we believe that God is good, and affirms that evil exists only in relation to what is good. (review abridged)

While I found parts of the book a bit cloying, like a movie where the onset of schmaltzy music lets you know that this is the bittersweet part of the story, I loved the breezy yet dynamic interplay between the broad-gendered Papa God + God in Christ + the feminine face of God the Spirit. While some readers were confused or angered by Young's use of a multi-gendered Holy Trinity, I loved the way he played with scriptural images of God to invite us to explore God's feminine expressions more fully.

Today's reading from the first chapter of Proverbs speaks of Wisdom as a woman, stalking the streets and insisting that her voice be heard. The location of her ranting, the town square, is an important place, for it is both the place where labourers would come to get day work, and the place where judges announced their decisions on court cases. This woman's call to faithfulness is directed, then, at both the common folk who live day-to-day, cash-on-the-barrelhead, and at the high-placed decision-makers whose actions and pronouncements have influence over the lives of others. Wisdom calls all of us to "wise up"!!

This combination of wise woman and wild woman is very much along the same lines as the later Biblical character, John the Baptist, whose wild insistence that people turn from their ways wisely directs them toward Jesus Christ. In both cases their energy is at once irresistible and off-putting, abrasive and totally correct. And, more than that: in the person and words of the female face of wisdom, we are confronted by God.

Three decades ago, Professor Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote a stunning book called *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. In a wide-ranging book that was amazing in its influence and foresight, she had this to say (p.117) about the Woman we meet in today's reading from Proverbs:

Canaanite and ancient Near Eastern thought is centered in the story of annual world renewal in which the dying and rising vegetation king is resurrected through the power of the Goddess. Likewise the figure of divine wisdom is represented in the various cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean as the Goddess. So powerful was this tradition that when the Hebrews adopted...the idea of divine wisdom, they too depicted it as a female figure who disclosed the wisdom of God and was the divine instrument in creation and revelation.

In classic Christian Trinitarian thought, this aligns with either the person of Holy Spirit, whose wise counsel guides our lives, or, more likely, the pre-existing presence of the Christ, who, long before the physical emergence of Jesus Christ was present and directly involved in the process of creation.

Wherever we place her in the Trinity, this much is clear: the voice of this wise and wild woman is a voice of God.

I started preaching as a young pup who had barely turned 21, and even in those days when fire, the wheel and dirt were still new innovations we were having these discussions about the feminine side of God. At that point in time pretty much every Bible translation was using the term *Man* to describe the whole human race, the term *Mankind* meant all of us, and God was always and exclusively referred to as *He*. But through those “inclusive language” discussions of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible was revisited and interpreters now asked, “Which of these pronouns is truly male, and which are broader than that?” With the development of the New Revised Standard Version in the late 1980s and a number of subsequent translations, the people-language got completely cleaned up and the language used for God got a good hard look as well.

In those days I remember being so, so thankful that the book of Proverbs depicted of God in feminine terms. Nobody had to make anything up, it was already right there in the Bible. The reading we heard this morning from the 1st chapter was clearly referring to this holy shouter as a “she”, and the 8th chapter repeats much of this and adds these words (Prov.8: 25-32):

Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth...I was beside [the Lord], 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. And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.

Even at the moment of creation, we see male and female of the Godhead side by side. These verses, alongside Jesus’ analogy in Matthew 23:37 of himself as a Mother Hen, gathering her chicks to safety, were of great benefit to progressive Christians attempting to break the patriarchy of scripture, seeking ways that this ancient book could speak to a society which has completely different ideas about women and men.

But it wasn’t just about language – it wasn’t just about casually referring to God as She rather than He now and then. To me, allowing ourselves to picture God in ways that we would conventionally see as female or feminine in addition to traditionally masculine ways, has the potential to open up the whole way we think about life, and the world, and the Divine.

Before launching into all this, I do need to label that in my worldview, there aren’t a lot of “blue jobs and pink jobs”, if you know what I mean. In my experience, and indeed in my own life, I am so used to seeing formerly male tasks like building things or formerly male jobs like Engineer being done by women that it barely registers any more. I am so used to seeing formerly female tasks like childcare or formerly female jobs like Nurse being carried out by men, I don’t need people to clarify that it’s a man doing the job. Nor do I believe that nurturing a child is inherently feminine while disciplining a child is inherently masculine. I do, however, believe that over the centuries that is exactly what we’ve done with God, taking our patriarchal view of men as strong, powerful and distant, and saying “that’s what God is like.”

When we allow the book of Proverbs to break open our ideas of gender and of God, things improve so much. Instead of picturing creation as a kind of mechanical process, with God forging or building or even commanding, we can also look at creation as birthing, with God relating to the world and all who dwell therein in the same way a mother tends to her child, rather than the way that a factory owner relates to a product. Instead of viewing sin and forgiveness like going to the principal’s office and getting the strap, we picture warm arms of embrace that hold us when we know we’ve messed up and let us know we are loved through even the worst of it. Instead of viewing our relationship with creation in a hierarchical, top-down modality in which we are the boss and the world is our servant, we introduce the idea that we are children of one mother, and hence that we are responsible to the elk and the tadpoles and the larch as our siblings of a common parent. It may even change the way we view ourselves; if we allow God to be of all genders or of no gender at all, we could very well make peace with any sexual issues that have plagued our lives. In particular, those who struggle to find or accept their sexual orientation or gender identity may well find this completely life-changing. For when we allow our image of a deeply masculine God to include traits traditionally understood as “feminine” – like sensitive, graceful, nurturing, accepting, life-giving – we are likely going to accept ourselves and others more fully as well.

The great thing in all of this, is that when we change our thoughts it isn't long before we change our actions as well. When our concept of God embraces she and he and they, when our understandings of who in our world is "allowed" to be a certain way or carry out certain tasks, our approach to the world changes completely. How do you wage war, how do you pollute the air or the water, how do you divide the world into have and have-not if you perceive yourselves all coming from the womb of the God of Love? And, remembering that the woman of Wisdom we met in the book of Proverbs searches for people who "get it" and warns them about the disastrous consequences of their current ways, how can we possibly continue to live selfish, arrogant lives if we know we will eventually have to go face to face with Mom AND Dad and explain our actions to them? As we move into increasingly open conceptions of God, our actions change and so does our degree of accountability.

This wise and wild woman God calls to us, even yells at us today to change our ways: to embrace with all our heart, mind, soul and strength the ways of reconciliation and inclusion and newness of life that are at the very core of God; to abandon what our world sees as "wise" and accept God's wisdom, where the first become last and the last become first. In the fullness of her call, in the completeness of her love, may we open ourselves to the world, to one another, and to the voice of God that was born right into our DNA. May this be so. Amen.

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