

*Our Mother's Bread*  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Psalm 84: 1-6 (NRSV)**

**How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts!**

**My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.**

**The sparrow has found her a house  
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;  
by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts,  
my king and my God.**

**Happy are they who dwell in your house!**

**They will always be praising you.**

**Happy are the people whose strength is in you!  
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.**

**Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of  
springs, for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.**

**They will climb from height to height, and the God of gods will reveal  
himself in Zion.**

Many years ago I stepped off of a boat in Spanish Wells, Bahamas.

The warm sun rippled light on gentle seas. Tropical breezes fanned the coral and sand. The small Methodist congregation gathered at the docks to greet us. We walked just a few short blocks to the house we would live in for the next two weeks. As we entered, the kitchen table was laden with bananas, papaya, mangos, and fresh baked bread. You could not buy bread in plastic bags from Pepperidge Farm or Wonder Bakeries. All the bread on the island was made in homes. Every few days two or three loaves would be given to us. Some bakers made extra loaves to sell, but it

all came out of mother's oven. I say mothers not to be sexist but to simply state that is who made the bread and they took extreme pride in the staff of life they set before family and friends.

Up until the mass production of bread the art of baking it belonged to women. In the ancient world it was a family process. Jeremiah (7:18) spoke of the responsibilities of members of the family for the baking: "The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough..." I read to you from Proverbs last week about the great banquet that Lady Wisdom was preparing. She went out into the streets inviting anyone who would listen to her dinner table, declaring: "I've prepared a wonderful spread – fresh baked bread, roast lamb, carefully selected wines." (Proverbs 9:5 as rendered by Eugene H. Peterson)<sup>1</sup>

The bread that Lady Wisdom prepares for those willing to learn is the Word of God. The idea is that we are invited to feast on sacred manna, to be nourished by whole grain enlightenment. There are no artificial flavors or preservatives in the wisdom of God. The question is what will feed you as you tread the highways of life and at the same time keep you on the path of right relationships with one another?

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), p. 841.

We need to understand both how to navigate the channels of commerce and how to keep our souls whole. How do we “get along in the world” and remain faithful to the values of the Christian faith? Lady Wisdom claims that this can only be accomplished by taking the sustenance of her bread. We eat her bread and become women and men of wisdom. Only at the banquet table of Lady Wisdom can we keep our heads on and our souls intact.

When we look at the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible we think of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and narratives that can be found in Genesis, Job, and Daniel. Some of that literature impresses us as observations such as, “To every thing there is a season.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) “A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.” (Proverbs 29:23) They have much to teach us about the way in which the world works and our comportment within it.

There are many examples of Lady Wisdom in the literature of other cultures and religions, including Sumerian, Egyptian, Grecian, and Roman. From the sagacity of Lao Tzu, Marcus Aurelius and Benjamin Franklin we can discipline our minds to walk wisely on the face of the earth. What we often fail to understand is the earth as a source for the wisdom of faith. That means more than natural metaphors, similes, or

examples of wise understanding. The earth or nature is a fountain of wisdom that is sacred and practical, holy and wholly incarnate of God's being.

L. William Countryman points out that we have too often contrasted "the world," or nature with the sacred and the church. What we forget is that the life of the spirit takes place in this world and her environment. Wisdom that comes from the earth is meant to serve us and save us in the world. Anglican poetry, wrote Countryman, "inspires not merely use of natural imagery but delight in the natural world as a way toward God."<sup>2</sup> He further argues:

"Nature is as good a language for spirituality as scripture. It is not theology at all in the intellectual sense. It is a matter of seizing upon everything in human experience that may reveal the possibilities of our human intimacy with God."<sup>3</sup>

Nature is the table-board of God's providence. But more than that, nature is Co-creator with God. She shares in the evolution and sustenance of life. If we dismiss nature from our understanding of God we dismiss God.

Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Huckleberries" speaks of the Eucharistic relationship between humanity and nature:

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<sup>2</sup> L. William Countryman, *The Poetic Imagination: An Anglican Spiritual Tradition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

“Man at length stands in such a relation to Nature as the animals which pluck and eat as they go. The fields and hills are a table constantly spread. Diet drinks, cordials, wines of all kinds and qualities, are bottled up in the skins of countless berries for their refreshment, and they quaff them at every turn. They seem offered to us not so much for food as for sociality, inviting us to picnic with Nature. We pluck and eat in remembrance of her. It is a sort of sacrament – a communion – the not forbidden fruits, which no serpent tempts us to eat. Slight and innocent savors which relate us to Nature, make us her guests, and entitle us to her regard and protection.”<sup>4</sup>

I find myself thinking about the connection of Lady Wisdom and huckleberries. Nature is the soil, grain, sun, and rain that makes its way under mother’s hands, who kneads the dough and bakes the bread.

Nature understands what it takes to create life, nourish life, sustain life, protect life, redeem life, and usher life back into the earth. There are no cursed animals, no forbidden fruits, and no human beings who are expelled from her company. As Thoreau said, “Nature makes us her guests, and entitle us to her regard and protection.” The regard and protection of life is a wisdom that reaches far deeper than thoughtful epigrams. Such wisdom is richly organic, rooting itself in the loam of being. It is the soul of Mother Nature, and I dare say, of the essence of

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<sup>4</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Huckleberries,” *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1980), p. 241.

God. Nature's table is an open table, inviting all to communion. Hers is a radically inclusive picnic of life.

The Hebrew Bible understands God as creator of the world and all of the creatures within it. God is also the mortar that holds together human beings, plants, animals, and elements. Lady Wisdom is given the task of helping us understand the order of creation, the life principles of the Creator, and the responsibility that is ours within the world.

Theologian Sallie McFague reminds us of Thomas Aquinas' assertion that any error about creation leads to an error about God.<sup>5</sup>

Catholic scholar, Fr. Richard P. McBrien wrote:

“For Thomas, the whole of creation is a theater of grace, embodying and mediating the presence and saving activity of God on our behalf. It is the stage on which the drama of salvation continuously unfolds.”<sup>6</sup>

It is the function of wisdom to engage the relationship of God with humanity and nature. And the better part of wisdom encourages us to redefine our relationship with nature. McFague believes that requires us to treat nature not as an object to be used – or used up – for utilitarian purposes only. Rather, wisdom suggests that we treat nature as a subject,

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<sup>5</sup> Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Richard P. McBrien, “For Aquinas, All Creation Was the Theater of Grace,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 2000.  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1141/is\\_15\\_36/ai\\_59607730/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_15_36/ai_59607730/)

an “end” in her own right, not simply the means of necessity or gratification.<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of Martin Buber’s theology and his calling the relationship between God and humans, and humans with one another, as an “I – Thou” kinship. When relationships devolve into “I – It” objectivity we take one another for granted; we assess the value of the relationship on what we can get for it; we dispose of relationships that are inconvenient; we use others and, if necessary, kill them. We know that friendships, marriages, communities, and nations deteriorate in this mix of use and abuse. The same applies to the creation. If the earth and her creatures are only objects for use and disposal she will erode and die. She will no longer be able to sustain the world of nature and the people within her. Wisdom compels the human family to a sacred synergy with God and nature.

Indeed, I would challenge the old theological doctrine of synergism that limited individual salvation to a combination of human will and divine grace. In the first place individual salvation is too narrow a lens to view the grace of God. Secondly salvation is a social movement of God’s providence throughout all of creation, both human and natural. To put it in a negative and blunt manner, we will be damned if we destroy the earth

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<sup>7</sup> McFague, pp. 5-25.

for selfish gain and imprudent exploitation. We will be damned not only in the sense that we will destroy ourselves, but also in the sense that we have taken the liberty to destroy what was not ours to destroy. We will be damned for the profound alienation that we have caused between the Creator and the Creation.

Several years ago I watched one of my children take a wooden stick and whack the living daylights out of a tree. Leaves were flying everywhere as this child fought some imagined dragon, or slay a fanciful monster, or just vented pent up emotions. After the child's energy was depleted I yelled out, "Now you have got to put them back?"

"What," asked the child?

"The leaves," I said. "Put the leaves back on the tree."

We later talked about how easy it is for us to take from nature, use up nature, and destroy nature. How much harder it is for us to restore her and give her life. Nature requires the same profound respect as any friendship or committed relationship. Without it we are all destroyed. With a sacred synergy of God, nature, and humanity we all have hope. A wise mother, Hildegard of Bingen, wrote:

"The soul is a breath of living spirit, that with excellent sensitivity, permeates the entire body to give it life. Just so, the breath of the air makes the earth fruitful. Thus the air is the soul of the earth, moistening it, greening it."



How fascinating it is that the breath of air that makes the earth fruitful is the same air that keeps our bodies alive. It is no coincidence that in both the Biblical Hebrew and Greek the word for air is the same word for wind, and breath, and spirit. That is an incomparable example of sacred synergy. Only the wise will eat such bread.

*Finis*