Let's start here: with a figure in the Bible, a character, who is so scarcely remembered, people are sometimes surprised to learn that she exists. She goes largely unmentioned in Western European and American Christianities. (I say Christianities because we all know there is not just one kind). I'm talking about the character, or figure, or the face of God known as “Sophia.”

Sophia is the Greek word for wisdom. In the scriptures, sometimes wisdom is portrayed as a thing, and sometimes wisdom is portrayed as a character. When it is portrayed as a thing, it’s usually translated from the Greek as “wisdom.” As a concept. When it is portrayed as a figure or person, it is usually called Sophia. But in the Greek, they are the same word. Sophia is wisdom.

In eastern Christian traditions, sophiology, the study of Sophia, has existed for a long time. It's about as ancient as the traditions themselves. The fourth century emperor Constantine dedicated the main church in his new capital to Sophia. But in western Christianity, where this church can trace its historical roots, Sophia was pretty much forgotten.

This is a really strange omission because, in the part of the bible Christians call the “old testament” Sophia is one of the most commonly mentioned characters. In fact, the Catholic writer Joyce Rupp points out, “There are only four other figures who are mentioned more than [Sophia or wisdom] in Jewish scripture (the Old Testament)...” Only Yahweh, Moses, David, and Job are mentioned more. From the original Hebrew, Sophia is a translation of the word chokmah, which is also feminine.

Here’s an example of ancient verses about Sophia, from Proverbs: "O ye simple, understand Sophia: and ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart. Hear; for I will speak of excellent things; and the opening of my lips shall be right things ... for Sophia is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to her."

In another verse, Sophia says she was with God before creation. Bible scholar Marcus Borg says that according to the scriptures, Sophia is from eternity and fills all that is. She is “the fashioner” and “mother” of all good things and her name often appears where we would expect to see the word “God.”
The part of the bible known as the Book of Wisdom describes Sophia guiding the Exodus people through the wilderness. We remember this as a story about Moses leading the people through the desert for forty years. But the scriptures also say that Sophia “led them by a marvelous road. She herself was their shelter by day and their starlight through the night” (Wis. 10:17). Here she most certainly sounds like God.

Well, if you grew up in a Christian tradition, as I know many of us did, you know that although when pressed Christian leaders will acknowledge that God does not in fact have a gender, the pronouns for God are never genderless. They are male. Clearly this is a choice, and it is not without impact. It has a lot to do with why women are banned from religious leadership in many traditions, and has it reinforced and at times justified the oppression of women for thousands of years.

And it’s very entrenched.

So it is that in the 1990s, when Christian feminists highlighted and embraced Sophia, and lifted her from her rather central role in the scriptures to a rather central role in a church conference, well, it caused a stir. More than a stir. A freak out.

In an article published in the Chicago Tribune, journalist Dan Lattin wrote, “What inspired the uproar over Sophia was a little-noticed, church-financed conference for Christian feminists convened in Minneapolis in November and called ‘Re-Imagining 1993.’ Reports soon emerged about some rather unorthodox prayers and rituals held at this ecumenical gathering, which attracted a crowd of 2,000 women and 85 men…iv”

Reportedly, the women chanted, "Our maker Sophia, we are women in your image... with the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life. . ." They spoke of nectar, and they went on to chant about the ways women’s bodies welcome lovers and “remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.” I am not reading it word for word on this Sunday morning, lest we become a church of 2000 women and 85 men. They used evocative language.

(Someone once told me, “What’s great about your preaching is you go right up to the edge and sometimes you take one step over it.” Today I think we’ll just leave it right here.)

I have a feeling those are not the only things that were chanted. But these very... embodied... things are what made the news. In an editorial in a Presbyterian publication called the Layman someone warned that church feminists want “to take the church back to the period when multiple goddesses were worshiped, where sex outside the covenant of marriage was declared a religious rite of passage, where children were regularly sacrificed and where everyone did what was right in her own eyes.”
Personally, I thought it sounded like an alright time. An experiment in feminist theology. It was just edgy.

That’s our wisdom story for this morning. You can’t stop the goddess.

But really, I’m interested in the fact that we have inherited a concept of wisdom as divine. As something that shelters. And, I love the way that, as Joyce Rupp points out:

Both Proverbs and the Book of Wisdom present Sophia as sitting by the city gates, crying out at the busiest corners by the entrance to the city (Wis. 6:14, Prov. 1:20–21). The gates of biblical times were the entrance into the marketplace or heart of the city. Symbolically, the gates where we meet Sophia today are in the midst of our busy, marketplace lives. It is here that we can still discover Divine Wisdom...

We have different ideas about what divine means or whether it even means anything at all. I invite you in this moment to think of this phrase “divine wisdom” as something very deep, very powerful. Something that is “from eternity” and “fills all that is.” That suggests something very expansive about what wisdom is. And also, that wisdom is a deeply spiritual thing. Something that we can acquire right in the course of our busy lives. If we are attentive to it. If we seek it, and practice it.

Our reading this morning was an excerpt from Toni Morrison. She says wisdom is something we acquire through a kind of progression. The progression starts with data. It moves on to information. Then knowledge. Then wisdom.

To me, this also suggests wisdom is an expansive kind of thing. I think of data as the close-up view. Like if you were to look at some cells under a microscope, and describe their shape and size. You’d have data.

Information is when you get a little more context, like you pan back a bit, and now you see that those cells are part of a heart. It moves blood, which carries oxygen. Now you have information about what the cells do. And then panning back more, you observe that the heart is in a person.

You, too, are a person. You have some knowledge about what it’s like to have a heart, to be made up in part of a heart. You are it. It is you. And you know that somehow a heart seems to be more than the sum of its parts. More than what you can see under a microscope. Sometimes it leads you, sometimes it is like another brain. Sometimes you wish you could remove it from your body, it hurts so much. Other times (may they be many) you feel it will somehow exceed the bounds of your body, you love so much and are moved so much.
You know something, you have knowledge, about hearts.

Data. Information. Knowledge. Wisdom is knowledge plus something more expansive. It’s knowledge plus an understanding of context. My heart is not the only heart. There is my lover. My friend. My neighbor. The stranger. Other hearts in other lands are beating. Have broken, have loved. We are interconnected.

Wisdom is knowledge plus self-reflection, but that self-reflection ultimately leads beyond the self. Conjure in your mind an image of a wise person. Real or imagined. Take a moment.

The person you are picturing is not selfish; is not mean. Right? There is no one who is mean who we would think of as embodying wisdom. Wise people are attuned to the experiences of others. They think of others. Wisdom is not perfection, but it involves a good measure of compassion.

The birth of many of the world’s wisdom traditions took place at a time we remember as the “Axial Age.” Out of the 200,000 or so years that humans have existed on the earth, there was a period of about five hundred years during which several crucial things happened that changed the course of human history. They happened all over the world, and they had such a lasting philosophical and religious impact, you’ll still recognize most of the names now. The Hebrew prophets hit the scene—prophers like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Siddharta Gautama, who we remember as the Buddha, arrived in the world. Homer, Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, and other Greek philosophers lived. In China, Lao Tzu founded Taosm and Confucious initiated Confucianism. And not long after all these, “fashionably late,” you could say, Jesus was born in Nazareth.

In her book, Becoming Wise, the journalist Krista Tippet describes the Axial Age as a time when “the cultivation of the inner life arose in interplay with the startling proposition that the well-being of others beyond kin and tribe—the stranger, the orphan, the outcast—was linked to one’s own. Humanity gave voice to the questions that have animated religion and philosophy ever since: What does it mean to be human? What matters in a life? What matters in a death? How to be of service to each other and the world?” Each of the great wisdom traditions teaches compassion and that we are all connected—stranger and family, far and near.

We call the world’s religions “wisdom traditions” because at their best—and this is attested to by all of the world’s mystics—at their best, applied skillfully, they make us wise, expansive, compassionate. When they are used incorrectly, unskillfully, when they are distorted by racism and sexism and capitalism, they become caricatures of themselves.
Wise people are compassionate. And wise people are thoughtful. They are not in a state of constant distraction. You didn't picture someone scrolling through Twitter just now. They are present. When I think of a wise person, one of the people I think of is Lola. I have mentioned her before. Lola was 96 years old. I was her housekeeper before I was a minister. Lola was not rich. Her family hired me to clean her small apartment because she was going blind and because they wanted someone to keep her company a few hours per week.

Lola didn’t move around much anymore and she rarely left her home, but her mind was wide, expansive. She had seen so much. And she was present. If I wasn’t feeling well, she sensed it as soon as I walked in the door. When my three-year-old son gently squeezed the wrinkly flesh of her upper arm with his soft little hand and asked “Why do you have so much extra skin?” she knew he was curious about the world, and she gave him an honest answer. She was very old, and almost at the end of her long life. She told him this with great peace in her voice. With humility. Perspective.

And... wise people know what they don’t know. They don't pretend to be experts in that which they are not, and they don’t make sloppy assumptions to fill in the gaps of their knowledge or prop up their egos.

Toni Morrison says,

...it’s easy, and it’s seductive, to assume that data is really knowledge. Or that information is, indeed, wisdom. Or that knowledge can exist without data. And how easy, and how effortlessly, one can parade and disguise itself as another. And how quickly we can forget that wisdom without knowledge, wisdom without any data, is just a hunch.

We see this confusion play out in our country. In is the information age, and we are in the middle of a disinformation war the scale of which is unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. Just for starters. People are scared, angry, disenfranchised, left out, justifiably suspicious, insecure, frightened about pandemics and about what we’ve done to the planet. “People.” We are people.

How do we want to be in these times?

What if we set an intention, each of us, to become wise people? That’s a spiritual direction we can choose to go. You go there by trying it out. We become that which we practice. What does a wisewoman, a wiseman, a wisdom person do when they are angry? When they are scared? Where does their hope come from? What do they know about the role joy and
beauty and a sense of humor play in a people’s ability to survive, and even thrive, in
dangerous times?

Sophia is “better than rubies and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared
to her.” I think this is true most of all when we are actively engaged in our lives and in the
world, and still there are things that are outside of our reach; outside of our control. Then
we need wisdom’s perspective, humility, compassion for self and others, and wisdom’s
embrace of those things that bring joy, laughter, those things that make the heart feel like it
will exceed the bounds of the body, even in the midst of hardship.

In fact, I think another word for wisdom, a word from Buddhism, is liberation. As I
prepared for this morning’s message, I remembered my time last fall with Zen Priest Angel
Kyodo Williams who teaches about liberation. In wisdom is spiritual liberation that is not
dependent on outside forces. Wisdom (Sophia) can lead us through the desert by a
marvelous road, our shelter by day, our starlight by night.

We will be exploring wisdom from different angles each Sunday this month. Before we
close, I want to especially draw your attention to next week, which we are calling “Bring a
Friend” Sunday. I’m going to preach a sermon that covers some of the basics about
Unitarian Universalism, which makes it a good intro for newcomers, and there will be
something in there for all of us old timers as well. So, if there is anyone in your life who you
think would find our church interesting, tell them! If there’s someone you’ve been thinking
about inviting, do it!

---


V From https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/03/06/the-source-of-self-regard-toni-morrison-wisdom-
information/?mc_cid=1d875ee9e9&mc_eid=04e3c8a6e2