

**Christmas Day 2022  
Grace St. Paul's**

“I came forth from the mouth of the Most High and I covered the earth like mist... From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and from eternity I shall remain... Approach me, you who desire me, and take your fill of my fruits.”

The Wisdom Woman in the Book of Sirach

Amen.

**I cannot begin this morning without mentioning who is not with us. Traditionally, I have asked the staff to not be here at this service. But for some, like the Thralls and Sara Heitshu, being here on Christmas day is important to their psyches. The same was true of The Rev. Chris Ledyard. No matter how he felt, no matter what other pressures he was experiencing, Chris wanted and needed to be here today. He made this service very special for us and I have thought about him a dozen times as I was setting up this morning. Thank you Chris for your laughter and your joy and all you gave and continue to give this congregation. And thank you Deacon Laurie for being the new Chris. Chris, this homily is especially for you.**

**In what now seems like a lifetime ago, another close friend and spiritual companion of mine, Dr. Al Painter, asked me to come to his class on World Religions at what was then Dixie College in St. George, Utah. As you might guess, situated as it is in the land of Deseret, over**

**90% of that class was made up of very young, very blonde, very naive LDS students. I will never forget the look of utter shock on their innocent faces as they slowly began to view Mormon history through the lens of the time honored faith traditions. Living in the sheltered environment of rural Utah, many of them had managed to get to that point in their lives believing that there was Jesus, followed by 1850 years of religious vacuum, whereupon Joseph Smith was born.**

**Al had set for himself what I told him was an unattainable goal. What he wanted at the conclusion of each session covering a specific world religion, was for every student in the class to say, “I can understand why someone would choose to be that religion.” Al, who went to college with world renowned religious scholar Huston Smith, was such a good professor that, to my great surprise, he was almost successful in reaching that goal. But of course, there were always a few that just could not go beyond their own religious upbringing. I particularly remember a male student, who at the end of the session on Hinduism, latched on to that tradition’s contention that religions are but different languages through which God speaks to the human heart. The tenderfoot lad boldly stood up and said, “you mean that**

**Hindus don't believe that their religion is the only true path to salvation?" And Al, very patiently, explained that Hindus believe that claiming salvation as the monopoly of any one religion is like suggesting that God can be found in this room, but not the next. "Why," our student wanted to know, "would anyone choose a religion that did not state that it was the one true and only correct faith?"**

**Little did I know that day that this question would haunt me throughout my ordained ministry. Last week it came up again when someone at our party for our financially strapped guests asked me, "If you really believe that your way is not the only path to God, why in the world did you become a priest?"**

**For me, the answer to that question is simple. I choose to be a Christian, and specifically an Episcopalian, because of today. The story of Christmas says something about God not found in any of the long standing faith traditions. The Gospel you just heard very clearly says that the Creator of the cosmos decided to become a part of what they created. "The Word became flesh and lived among us."**

**The whole notion of incarnation, of God becoming part of God's own creation, makes absolutely no sense in any of those religions that**

**Al taught. It is, in fact, a sacrilegious notion in most of them, a slap in the face of the Creator God. I appreciate the sentiment when someone suggests that all religions are basically the same, attempting to bring unity to people of varying faith traditions. But the truth of the matter is that Christmas dramatically separates us from the others. My view of God has expanded over the years not because the world religions teach the same thing, but because they understand things very differently. That has helped me see God from a much broader perspective.**

**But there are faith traditions that World Religion classes rarely, if ever, talk about. And on this sacred morning, I want to suggest to you that the story you just heard is not totally unique. Listen to these tales and tell me if it is just me:**

**“God created me at the beginning of God’s work, the first of God’s acts of old...When there were no depths, I was brought forth...before the mountains had been shaped...When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep...when God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside God, like God’s master workman; and I was daily God’s delight,**

**rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the children of humans."**

**We have spoken of this speaker before. It is Sophia, Lady Wisdom, right there in Proverbs 8 of our Hebrew Bible. It is impossible for me to hear today's Gospel and not believe that the author was not directly linking the Word, Jesus, the Cosmic Christ with Sophia. In fact, it sounds suspiciously like the same entity. The quote with which I began is also from Sophia. Her discussion of fruits sounds mysteriously like the bread and wine that will come later in the Gospels about Jesus. But wait, there is more.**

**She is always present. She alone has the creative power to sustain life on earth. She is the prime origin for the water, the earth, the sun, and the moon. She embodies the mountains. She presides over planting and harvesting. She is the landscape itself. She is also the mother of the entire space/time continuum. She is the Mother who creates life, nourishes and protects. She cares for the well being of all plants and animals. Her name is Pachamama, literally translated as World Mother but commonly known as Mother Earth. She is Mother**

**Earth as well as Mother of the Earth. She is the revered goddess of the indigenous people of the Andes.**

**When you put the Hebrew description of Sophia next to the Gospel you just heard, and then put both of them next to the Andean account of Pachamama, it is really difficult to believe that they came out of cultures on opposite sides of the planet who could not have possibly been aware of one another. All three of them make a direct connection between a divine entity around at the beginning of time and all of the natural world, including us. And as we discussed last night, it is impossible to understand how the Christian church of the fourth century and beyond disconnected the Cosmic Christ from the cosmos. How do you do that? How do you not see in our Christmas story the lesson that even God is part of nature? But the point I want to make this morning is that while our religion varies greatly from the ones covered in World religion classes, it is amazingly similar to the religion of many indigenous cultures. If Pachamama is not evidence enough, try this one.**

**In the beginning, two powerful beings created all manner of things. As they were finishing their work, and the new sun reached**

**high noon, another manner of being appeared before them. She was a beautiful human. She came into being when a drop of dew fell on a leaf and was warmed by the sun. “I am love,” said the maiden. “I am a strength giver, I am the nourisher. I am the provider of men and animals.” The creation beings thanked the Great Mystery for having sent them the maiden.**

**The maiden married, and became the First Mother of the people. As the population of humans increased and became numerous, wild animals became scarce and the people were starving. They came to First Mother for help. She grieved for all of them when they said, “We are so hungry. Feed us.” She realized there was but one solution. She asked her husband to kill her and then have her sons drag her body over the empty patches of the earth. She then told the people to leave that place and come back after seven moons.**

**When the husband, the children, and the children’s children returned, they found that the First Mother’s flesh had grown into large green plants with tassels. The people partook of the fruit of the plant that came from the Mother’s flesh. It was very sweet and abundant and it fed everyone. They called the fruit corn and the family did what**

**the Mother told them. They did not eat all of the kernels, but put some back into the earth. In this way, the Corn Mother's flesh fed the people from generation to generation to this very day.**

**The Corn Mother, who appears in many indigenous traditions across the Americas, is dramatically similar to the Cosmic Christ of Christmas and Lady Wisdom of Proverbs. Not only is she around at the beginning of creation, but her incarnation into the created order teaches the same lessons about our interconnectedness with all of nature that "the Word becoming flesh" does. In addition, it is impossible to not see the uncanny similarity between Jesus' institution of the sacrament of communion, the sharing of Corn Mother's flesh to be sacred food for all the people, and Sophia's gift to the world of all of her fruits. Even the language used to describe Jesus' and Corn Mother's death sounds eerily alike. Both gave their lives so that their people could live.**

**These are not the only examples, but you get the picture. Our Christmas story connects us to nature just like the narratives in many indigenous cultures. We are related in a much more intimate way to the so called primitive cultures than we are to the Western European**

**ones. Christmas, especially today's Gospel, was meant to teach us of our interconnectedness not just to other humans but to the entire cosmos. Christmas therefore, must also be about mending our broken relationships with all of the indigenous cultures who have been teaching the same thing for generation upon generation. And it also has to be about seeing how we are called to protect the planet, just like indigenous cultures are called to do the same.**

**Of course, I am sure you also noticed that while our Cosmic Christ story sounds very much like the narratives of Lady Wisdom, Pachamama and the Corn Mother, there is one major difference. Yep. Gender. Why is it that our Christ figure is male and all the others are female? I don't think we can just argue that our tradition comes out of a male-centric world while the others are all matrilineal. The fact that Sophia comes out of that patriarchal society defeats that argument.**

**There is a lot of theology going on in the narratives of Sophia, Pachamama, and Corn Mother, just like there is in today's prologue from the Gospel of John. Take, for example, Corn Mother. She is killed and physically ripped apart until only her bones are left. Who does that to her? In the Penobscot version of the story you just heard,**

**it is her husband and male offspring. But no matter what tribe tells the story, it is always males that do this. Could it be that this story is also a warning to males about their tendency toward violence? Is part of Corn Mother's lesson aimed at toxic masculinity? Are we being taught to value the gifts of women, and to make sure they are always an important part of the decision making process in all aspects of society? Are we to remember that healing and health, food and sacrament came from women and that women should always be honored for that?**

**I would suggest that this is a major part of the Jewish and indigenous lessons that these women divinities teach us. And here is my wild and perhaps heretical hypothesis for you this Christmas morn. With so many commonalities in all of these cultural stories, I find it extremely difficult to believe that our Christmas story, the Gospel you just heard, is the only true revelation ever experienced. If I was to accept that, would I be any different than that naive young man in AI's World Religion class those many years ago? I find it impossible to fathom that each is not a revelation of the divine, that each is not just a different cultural expression of what we tell in our Christmas story.**

**In fact, I will go one further heretical step. I believe all of those stories are narratives about the Cosmic Christ. And if that is the case, could it be that Jesus represents the male character who learned from Sophia, from Pachamama and from the Corn Mother? Yes, I believe that Jesus is the incarnation of the male divinity figure who embraced what the Corn Mother taught, that Jesus is the culmination of the male divine, the examples to males of how to love and care for all.**

**Beloved, that is my Christmas gift to all of you this morning. I present to you not one incredible story of the Cosmic Christ, but four of them. And my dream is that this enlightenment will once and for all end the enmity between the indigenous world and the Christian world.**

**My Lakota friends have a two word phrase they use to describe the interconnectedness of all of creation. It is Mitakuye Oyasin, We are all Related. The unity in our Christmas stories suggests to me that we are even more intimately related then we ever understood. And I cannot imagine a more important Christmas message. Let us celebrate that intimacy, and share all of our Christmas stories with a world ready to be healed. Amen.**